

Day of Pentecost

9 June 2019

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Genesis 11: 1-9

John 14: 8-7; 25-27

The Voice

Today is Pentecost. It is also the third day in the series of Sundays which focus us upon the Lord's Prayer. Today's segment of that prayer being the *location* of the "Our Father" of last week: *Our Father, who art in heaven*. In blending these two important themes together (Pentecost and "who art in heaven"), I believe we need some context...specifically, some historical context.



Ain Vares

You may or may not know that Pentecost comes to us from the Hebrew people and begins in the Old Testament as a festival and Holy Day known as the Feast of Harvest (it's recorded in Exodus and in Numbers among others). It represents the gathering of first fruits each year and so is also called the Feast of Weeks, coming as it does by counting 7 weeks plus 1 day after the harvest, according to Leviticus, or exactly 50 days...counted in order to determine when to celebrate the festival...50 days it is...and so, in the Greek, *Pentecost*. It is also during this time that the Jewish community recalls God's revealing the 10 commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

That is what the gathering in the New Testament...50 days after Jesus' resurrection was all about (Jesus, often referred to as "the first fruits of eternal life). People from many nations came together in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost...each spoke in a different language, of course, being as they were from a variety of nations. It is at this gathering that the Holy Spirit comes upon them and allows them to be able to understand one another even though their languages were different. It is no surprise that with such an expression of Spirit over 3,000 people were added to the Christian community in one day. The business of the Spirit's coming upon people like tongues of fire and flames was meant for everyone...including the rather under control Presbyterians (lol). Pentecost is the only thing that the Presbyterians would be moved by according to the statement made by someone who remarked about the decent and orderly behaviors of Presbyterians and their Book of Order. "It would take a stick of dynamite, or Pentecost, to disorder most Presbyterian congregations." This morning you will experience both as we "celebrate" Pentecost at the end of the service.

Put another way, if you were around back in the beginning of that first century who somehow missed God's coming to us in Jesus Christ...if you missed God's voice through the person of his Son...you had a second chance at Pentecost. God's coming in the voice of the Spirit was

accompanied by an amazing ability to hear and understand those around you. There it was, God, who is in heaven, reaching down with a Voice that anyone and everyone could comprehend and understand. God's voice through the Spirit encouraging unity and community among us.

It is interesting that the Old Testament lectionary text for today is found in Genesis, and suggests to us that this New Testament Pentecost was its contradiction. First century Pentecost actually reverses the effects of God's action in the Genesis text. Listen:

Genesis 11: 1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

We hear from the text that in the beginning people could understand each other. They could experience unity, perhaps as God's intention for Creation, because everyone had the same language which seemed to be a good thing at the time. But these people apparently took advantage of their common parlance and decided to join together in the building of a city, and then a tower that could reach up to the heavens. They designed all of this without a thought as to God's will for them much less concern for what God would think of it. And so it was that they decided that they could make a name for themselves, the text tells us. It is this attitude that displeased God when he came down to check on what they were doing, and to examine the city. "Now nothing will be impossible for them to do," God said. God recognized that, left to their own devices without consultation from him, they would just do more and more that would result in their own harm, ultimately. So God imposed multiple languages upon them, confusing their understanding of one another. In such a state they could not focus on making names for themselves and glorying in their own accomplishments.

It's an ongoing problem for God, this business of getting the attention of the people to focus on his Word/his Voice rather than our own. Adam and Eve didn't listen and, so, gained the inevitably destructive knowledge of Good and Evil, which was way beyond their capacity to manage. And so they were removed from the Garden to a safer location outside Eden.

It is clear that the attitudes of the people in Genesis were not a context in which they were capable of listening and receiving God's consultation. Instead it was a context that supported their own voices over God's; and that never has a good outcome. Not so much because God is

egotistical and wants credit for himself, but because people of mortal make-up simply are not capable of managing their own lives. We just don't have what it takes to be God...no matter how qualified we may consider ourselves to be.

There is really only one certain pattern for success for us, and that is to go to God in prayer for consultation and guidance before we do *anything*. It was the pattern and example that Jesus set, following the prophets, like Nehemiah who consulted God before quitting his job and going to rebuild Jerusalem. Moses' writing of the Pentateuch was God inspired, as was David's writing of the Psalms, Solomon's wisdom, Jeremiah's grief, and Amos becoming a prophet. Holly could make it a great children's project to look up these God-inspired people. Pray first; Act Later. God will answer.

There was a woman who was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car.

She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that her daughter's fever was getting worse. She said, "You might find a coat hanger, and use that to open the door."

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who at some time or other had locked the keys in their car.

Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this."

So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful.

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is sick. I stopped to get her some medication, and I locked the keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"

He said, "Sure". He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are a very nice man."

The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour."

The woman hugged the man again, and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh, Thank you God! You even sent me a professional!"

Often it is the context in which a person places him or herself that dictates the perceived effectiveness of prayer. Jesus tells us that we may ask anything, and it will be given to us. IT is just that we must have the right frame of mind, the right context, in order to receive that which is given. We cannot determine for ourselves, build towers to heaven, assuming that God will just bless it because we ask him to do so. We must consult God first for his design and open ourselves to receiving the answer.

"Who art in heaven"...heaven is God's context. More than being about a geographic location, heaven is the context from which God speaks to us. It is a place of peace and love and happiness, and it is out of that context that God's voice comes to us in the Spirit. We tend to say that God is "up there" as the Greek world ordered things in a tier: heaven, earth, underground.

But the gospel of John tells us that God's place of residence is within us...God abides/lives in each of us.

This summer we will have visitors from Hungary, and I am already working on getting the house ready to receive them...going about creating a welcoming context for them both practically and in terms of comfort. I'm even attempting to regain some of the language again. Although I must say there is probably an equal chance that the Spirit could come upon us and create understanding between us long before I learn the language on my own. It is not a stretch to say, however, that if we are to welcome God into our lives...that the context of love and peace needs to be within us...as it is in heaven actually.

Context, I think, makes all the difference between the situation in Genesis and the one in New Testament Pentecost. In the first, the people were contextually selfish and self-absorbed. Their goals were about making names for themselves and being known for their cleverness and accomplishment. They were dangerous to themselves and others...no wonder God eventually flooded them out and started over. Why were the people in the New Testament able to manage mutual understanding, while the Genesis people were not?

In contrast, the New Testament community had known JESUS...which caused them to place themselves in a context of openness and at least desired faithfulness to God. And so, they were in a context that was receptive to God's Spirit and God's voice through that Spirit. God enabled understanding and peace among them. God executed the opposite of his action in the Genesis Pentecost where the context was about the people...not about God. First century Pentecost was God-based. As such, New Testament Pentecost became the birth of a whole community whose context held in common the desire to listen and consult with God, to glorify him in all they did and to live in unity and peace with one another...heaven on earth of sorts. And we call it the Church...at its best. At least the potential is there.

Context. Having a receptive context for the Spirit of God in our lives means that we must make room for God. That's hard for us...our lives are so crowded and busy there's hardly room or space for anything else...even going to church on a Sunday morning can be difficult because of our tight, complicated schedules.

By way of a somewhat humorous example, Martin Copenhaver, president of Andover Newton Theological Seminary, bemoaning the loss of yet another space in our overcrowded lives says, "When I was learning to type, I was taught that you should have two spaces after a period before starting a new sentence. Now we are told, by no less an arbiter than The Chicago Manual of Style, that one space is the norm. The primary reason they cite for preferring a single space is efficiency. Of course, it all comes down to efficiency, as so much seems to these days. They conclude that typing two spaces "is inefficient, requiring an extra keystroke for every sentence." An extra keystroke? Well, that is simply too much to ask, don't you think? We laugh and yet how often do you actually make space...even a small space...to consult with God about your next move in life?

J.R.R. Tolkien told the story of his experience with space while correcting students' essays. Space gives us breathing room, which is another way of saying that space allows for the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Tolkien told the story of correcting student essays, when he came upon a blank page among the papers. He stared at it for a moment and then wrote upon it, "In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit." It just came to him like a revelation. And that's how he started his book, *The Hobbit*, the novel that leads into *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But for that inspiration, he needed that blank page, just a little space between all of those words. Just a little space. The Holy Spirit can work with that.

So, this morning we are going to simulate that blank page, becoming those first century Christians at Pentecost whose context allowed for God, who art in heaven, to live in each of them... We are going to open ourselves to the Spirit and listen... You were given a card in your bulletin with the picture of the flame of the Spirit on the front. We will take a full minute of space/breathing room wherein you are to listen for the Spirit of God to speak to you and write down what you are inspired to write. I'm inviting you to then place your cards in the offering plate...so that we might share the Spirit of God.

Friends, God who art in heaven is a context such as heaven itself has of love, peace and happiness; and that same God seeks that same context within each of us. And we best get ourselves ready...get our homes in order, because the Spirit is surely knocking on our doors. Ignatius the martyr, used to call himself *Theophorous*, or *Godbearer*, because, he said, "I bear with me the Holy Ghost." And so do all of us. We are all *Godbearers* because God abides/lives in each of us as Jesus said. Be ready, for the Spirit will inspire us if only we ask.

Amen.