

The Power of Communication
May 28, 2023 – Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2: 1-21
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Grand Rapids MI

Today we are beginning a new sermon series called God's Creative Connection. Throughout the scriptures we see God reaching out, speaking to and through people, even sending Jesus to be among us and giving us a message from God, the Good News that God loves us and seeks to save us. It is a message we find throughout scripture and see manifest fully in the life and teachings of Christ. But how people experience and understand that sense of salvation really differs from person to person. In the Gospels we see for some salvation came in the form of healing. For others salvation may be in restoring people to the community like when the lepers came to Jesus. For others it was the proclamation that their sins were forgiven. For others it was seeing God's provision in their lives like at the feeding of the five thousand. Each one heard and received what was needed to bring about healing and salvation.

As we celebrate Pentecost this day, we see the coming of the Holy Spirit who was sent to empower the disciples to be witnesses to the people about the truth of Jesus and the work we are all called to as disciples. This witness was extraordinary because it was given to the people in a way that they could understand. It was in a language that they could fully relate to, and it spoke to them. Remember in the text where it says, ““Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And 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.”

As Jesus has been taken into heaven, God is continuing to meet our needs to understand and receive a fresh revelation of God through the coming of the holy spirit in this story.

But it does not stop with this day of Pentecost. Time and again in the stories of Acts and even into the life of the church throughout history, we see God pour out the spirit again and again. There is a reason we call this the Season of Pentecost and Ordinary Time in the church calendar. The coming of the Holy Spirit is not just once, but it happens when the church needs a deeper revelation in the expansive work of God in the world or needs a reformation of some kind. Stephen is moved by the Spirit to go and speak to the Ethiopian eunuch. The Spirit moved and revealed to Peter that there are no unclean people. This helped the church understand that salvation was not just for the Jewish People but for all people, especially the Romans also known as gentiles. The Spirit moved and guided Paul around the Mediterranean opening doors. Each time we see an outpouring of the spirit we see people moved by the spirit to move in a new direction, to expand the Gospel message. Time and again people hear God speaking to them in a way that speaks to their hearts, like a mother tongue.

I think in many ways people who are spiritually seeking experience God in a similar way. Each one of us seek to feel like this is home, a spiritual home, where God is calling us. It is where we can sense the presence of God. We feel loved and accepted just as we are, we feel like we have found what we have been looking for. When that happens there is a deep sense of peace and confirmation deep within us. For me I call that the Holy Spirit.

That is God communicating with us in a way that we understand, and we are saved, and finally home, like the prodigal son. Over a lifetime that community may change. It changes in many ways, specially to meeting our own changing needs as we grow. In my own faith journey, I have traversed through three different spiritual communities; Catholic, Charismatic Pentecostal or Assemblies of God and now the UCC. Each one helped me experience the Divine in a distinct and meaningful way that has shaped my

faith and my ministry. I was asked once, “how has those three spiritual homes shaped your understanding of God and your faith in God?” My response then, and now are similar.

My catholic faith emphasized the mystery of the divine. It helped me appreciate the infinite expanse of God around me and to be in awe of it. My Charismatic faith taught me to tune my heart and ear to the Spirit and trust that God is at work within me and others. It is where I found my calling and belief that God has a plan for my life. Now in the United Church of Christ I see the complex work of reconciliation. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Godself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

This call to the ministry of reconciliation is included in the original emblem of the United Church of Christ “That they all may be One.” A Quote from John 17. This call to reconciliation is seen in the merger of our historic denominations. It is seen in our work that started in the 1960s seeking civil rights and racial reconciliation. Many of the social justice movements in recent history shows the UCC advocating for such rights as: Disability rights, women’s rights, racial equality, desegregation, workers rights and so forth. We even stopped General Synod one year so the delegates could join a labor workers protest march. We joined with other denominations who were also responding to the call of the Spirit to seek Peace and reconciliation in our world.

The work of reconciliation is not just on an individual level, but needs to also be on a systemic and national and even international level to truly turn our world around. Peace and reconciliation are the work of the Gospel. That is why we believe that God is still speaking. We understand on some level that the needs of our world are changing and

the call upon the church needs to also be changing to address those needs. We believe that God speaks to us as a collective body of faith that the world needs.

Reconciliation begins with confession. Us, with the help of the holy spirit to be convicted of sin in us, in our culture and society and even in the church. As our culture continues to address the systemic sins of our nation such as of racism, white supremacy, misogyny and colonialism the churches are also being called to see our complicity in this. Such abuses have caused the exploitation, domination and even genocide of other people often with the backing of the church. Both Catholic and Protestant churches know we benefited from the Boarding School system and the expansion of colonialism around the world because of the Doctrine of Discovery written by the Catholic Church that backed Columbus and the slave trade.

Just this year Pope Francis, on behalf of the Catholic church, renounced the Papal Bulls, the Doctrine of Discovery, written in the 15th century.

In an NPR article on the Pope's decree said, "The Vatican renounces the mindset of cultural or racial superiority which allowed for that objectification or subjection of people, and strongly condemns any attitudes or actions that threaten or damage the dignity of the human person."

The UCC publicly renounced the Doctrine of Discovery in 2013 at our General Synod. This too is the work of the Holy Spirit convicting us of our sin and calling us to repentance. Reforming the church once again to be a place of healing, justice and restoration.

So on this Pentecost Sunday let us attune our hearts to hear the voice of the spirit for our own work here in Grand Rapids. May we pray earnestly pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will embolden us to great works of faith in the name of Jesus. May we listen for the still speaking voice of God in our hearts this day and every day. Amen.