

Faith Mennonite Church
May 27, 2012 - Pentecost
Joetta Schlabach

What does this mean? *Acts 2:1-21*

Today we are celebrating Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Today we remember the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, God's presence, that transformed a small band of believers into a movement. The three years they had followed Jesus, life always exceeded expectations. Jesus took them places they never imagined going, led them into conversations and relationships with people they sometimes would have rather avoided, and stretched their minds to the point of wonderment. And it only continued.

The day of Pentecost began with a mono-cultural group of Galileans—the the lowly, powerless folks in society—huddled and praying in the protection of an enclosed house. Then the mighty wind of the Spirit blew in. She didn't damage the house, but blew those folks out onto the streets with a message that resonated with Jewish people of all cultures who were present in Jerusalem—people from places within the Roman Empire and beyond, including the places we know today as Iran and Iraq.

In their amazement the people asked, “What does this mean?” As we look back on an event that happened so long ago, yet has replayed itself again and again in distinct eras and places, we too ask, “What does this mean?”

To begin answering that question, we need to start with the word Pentecost, a Jewish festival. The word comes from the Hebrew *Shavuot*, or “Feast of Weeks,” that is prescribed in Leviticus 23. This was a harvest celebration, in which people made an offering of their first fruit of grain. The timing of the festival, between Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, was calculated in a formula that is similar to the formula that determined the Year of Jubilee.

Listen to these 2 descriptions of Pentecost and Jubilee. First for Pentecost, from Leviticus 23:15-16:

And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, *fifty* days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.

Now for the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25:8-10

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. [...]And you shall hallow the *fiftieth* year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

The celebration of Pentecost was an annual event that involved sharing the first-fruits of the grain harvest. It established a familiar rhythm, a pattern, to prepare the people for the Jubilee. Jubilee was intended as an every-50-year event to share not just the harvest, but the land itself.

These two celebrations were joined by a third practice, which was included in the Levitical instructions for the Feast of Weeks (23:22): “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God (23:22).”

So Pentecost was a religious holiday that reminded people that all that they had came from God. By giving an offering, they showed their trust in God's care. By sharing with others, through the practice of gleaning, they recognized God's desire that everyone share equally in the gifts of the earth.

Equitable sharing begins with the sharing of power and control over resources. We know that problems of poverty in our world are not due to lack of resources but lack of their equitable distribution. Some people, some corporations, and some countries, accumulate and control resources to the demise of others.

When we realize this political and social nature of the historical Pentecost festival, several things stand out in the description in Acts 2. We note that the manifestation of the Spirit—the fire—didn't settle just on the twelve apostles, the leaders of the group in the upper room, but distributed itself on each person, men and women alike.

There is also a re-distribution of power at work when this group of Galileans begins to speak in many languages. Within Israel, Galilee was considered the back country, the land of fishermen and shepherds; not of the learned folks and leaders. But now, all of a sudden, it's these folks from across the tracks, from North Minneapolis, who are speaking the languages of the cosmopolitan, diaspora Jews who have lived in other parts of the Roman Empire and beyond. All of these folks were no doubt fluent in Greek and Aramaic, so they didn't need translation into their own language for basic understanding. But in a single, multilingual moment, they experienced the wonder that God affirmed the multi-cultural diversity that each of them represented *and* that God once again chose the insignificant and powerless through whom to manifest God's movement in the world.

Some, who wished to control the event, tried to delegitimize it, writing off the Galileans as a bunch of drunks. But those attuned to God's Spirit, opened themselves to the big question: "What does this mean?" And they listened as Peter, the fisherman, preached a powerful and risky sermon, connecting what was happening that day with the recent events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In the sermon, that extended beyond the verses we heard this morning, Peter proclaimed Jesus both Messiah (the awaited leader of the Jewish people) and Lord (the title for Caesar), challenging the religious and political structures of the time.

What does this mean? today? for us? For nearly 500 years, Anabaptist Mennonites have viewed ourselves as the Galileans in the larger Christian landscape. Our ancestors farmed and built humble church buildings. We weren't the land or railroad barons; we didn't build cathedrals. We didn't see ourselves as people of power even as we lived in Europe or North America, the world empires of the past century and a half.

But as predominantly white, educated Christians living in the United States today, we represent power and privilege in the global (and local) Christian body. We have sung and prayed this morning for God's Spirit to fill this place and I believe that is happening and has been happening in our 50-year history. But I wonder if our place in the Acts 2 story isn't in reality among the God-fearing people who watched and marveled at what was going on among the Galileans, swept up by God's Spirit. Who might the Galileans be today with whom we can wonder and from whom we can hear and learn about the wonderful works of God?

I caught a few glimpses of "Galileans" during my sabbatical earlier this year as I had the privilege of visiting some other congregations. In Honduras, I visited the Mennonite Church in San Marcos, Ocotepeque, a rural town on the western side of the country, near El Salvador. Back in the 1980s during the civil war in El Salvador, this church worked with the influx of Salvadoran refugees who had fled the repression and violence in their country and settled in a refugee camp outside of the town. The refugees have long since returned home, and today this church is growing and helping its neighbors build and improve homes they have built where the refugee camp once stood. A leveling, a distribution of resources is also happening. When I was present, a group of men from several Mennonite Churches in Ohio were also visiting. They travel to Honduras from time to time and work at the direction of the church in San Marcos. They bring money for building supplies and educational scholarships, but allow the Honduran church to determine who will benefit from the aid. We might think of this as a modern, transnational form of gleaning.

Closer to home, we live in cities that are teeming with multicultural diversity. Our neighborhoods have churches of many ethnicities and languages. The Pentecost story suggests that we need one another, that persons of other cultural backgrounds have something to share with us and teach us just as we have gifts of resources, friendship and experience to share with them.

How will Pentecost break in on us? In Acts 1, just before the Pentecost story, Luke wrote that the disciples and women followers, and Jesus' mother and brothers were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Pentecost comes when it becomes our prayerful desire.

Another church I visited during my sabbatical was the (Presbyterian) Church of All Nations, not far away in Colombia Heights. This church began in 2004 when a group of about 100 1st- and 2nd-generation Korean American members of the Presbyterian church had a vision for becoming a multi-cultural church. Within a year the vision was taking shape and they began renting space in the building of an older, Caucasian Presbyterian congregation with a dwindling membership. This church had been prayerfully considering strategies for attracting new members and it soon became clear to them that they should simply join the Church of all Nations, which they did. This congregation now has members from some 25 different countries and a leadership team that includes persons of African, Asian, European and Latin American origin. They also have a number of young interns, learning what the new pentecostal church of the future might look like and be. The church has attracted members from the conservative Northwestern College in St. Paul as well as the liberal United Theological Seminary. They share a simple meal each Sunday after church and they have a clothing & household exchange room that's open each Sunday.

These are stories not to emulate or duplicate but to help us dream and to continue asking: “What does this mean?” In the coming days and months, I invite us to pray with thanksgiving for what God has done and is doing in our midst. And let us pray with expectation and longing for new experiences of the Spirit that we do not yet imagine.