

Year A, June 4, 2017
Pentecost
Christ Church, Mexia

Today is Pentecost, the day we received the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised, and the day we consider to be the birth of the church. As we heard in the reading from Acts today, the spirit arrived with the sound of wind, with fire, and with new language abilities for the Apostles. Presumably then, the Apostles are now ready to spread the gospel to others speaking in different tongues.

Now I don't want to put a damper on today which is usually celebrated with much more fanfare, nor do I want to seem ungrateful for all that God has provided to the church. However, I do think it is good for us to think about three things associated with today and with the work of the church, especially now.

First, we need the Holy Spirit to be with us at all times when we are doing the work of the church. It is God, the Holy Spirit, working through us that allows us to be successful in our work. We don't accomplish much through our own power, our own devices, even if we have spiritual gifts as Paul discusses in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul demonstrates that it takes the combination of all the gifts for the church to function effectively as well. But in any case, it is always good to invite the Holy Spirit to be present when we do the work of the church.

Second, we need to know more than just language to communicate the gospel effectively. We tend to be drawn to and are influenced more by people who are like us, rather than those who are different. Let me illustrate via the following story:

"In 1873, a Belgian Catholic priest named Joseph Damien De Veuster was sent to minister to lepers on the Hawaiian Island of Molokai. When he arrived, he immediately began to meet each one of the lepers in the colony in hopes of building a friendship. But wherever he turned, people shunned him. It seemed as though every door was closed. He poured his life into his work, erecting a chapel, beginning worship services and pouring out his heart to the lepers. But it was to no avail. No one responded to his ministry. After twelve years Father Damien decided to leave.

Dejectedly, he made his way to the docks to board a ship that would take him back to Belgium. As he stood on the dock, he wrung his

hands nervously, recounting his futile ministry among the lepers. As he did he looked down at his hands, he noticed some mysterious white spots and felt some numbness. Almost immediately he knew what was happening to his body. He had contracted leprosy.

It was then that he knew what he had to do. He returned to the leper colony and to his work. Quickly the word about his disease spread through the colony. Within a matter of hours everyone knew. Hundreds of them gathered outside his hut, they understood his pain, his fear and uncertainty about the future. But the biggest surprise was the following Sunday. As Father Damien arrived at the Chapel, he found hundreds of worshippers there. By the time the service began, there were many more with standing room only, and many gathered outside of the chapel. His ministry became enormously successful. The reason? He was one of them. He understood and empathized with them.” (Morgan, p. 258)

Now neither I nor the author of the story are suggesting that the only successful way to minister to lepers is to contract leprosy. But you have to be able to see things from their perspective, to be able to think and feel like them and be able to show it through your empathy. You can't change your skin color, for example, to be able to minister to people of a different color, but you can be successful if you really learn to feel their concerns and to overcome your own preconceived biases – in addition to being led by the Holy Spirit, who can help lift us out of ourselves. Importantly, we have to know the people well and we have to find commonalities that provide the bonds of similarity, if we are to be accepted and heard.

Lastly, we need some knowledge about what we can share and how we can share it. We may know the Spanish words for Narthex, Nave, Eucharist, etc., words that may be understandable to Anglicans, for example, but even in Spanish, the language of our intended audience, may not resonate at all with those who have no way of knowing what they mean – who have never heard them. Jesus told stories that the people of the 1st century could easily understand. What are the stories that can reach the others we are trying to reach? Usually, they are not our stories.

And that sounds like a lot of work, and it is. But sometimes we just need to be there. “Methodist preacher Charles Allen tells of a little child who went on an errand for her mother. She was late coming back, and her mother asked for an explanation. The child explained that a playmate of hers down the street had fallen and broken her doll

and that she had helped her. The mother wondered what she could do to help mend the broken doll. The little girl made a marvelous reply. 'I just sat down and helped her cry.'" (Morgan, p. 254)

Yes, we need to do much to prepare ourselves for the work of the church sometimes. But when you don't know what to do, just be present and help them do what they are doing.

In the name of the one God - the Creator, The Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.