

Our Pentecost Community

Day of Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 31, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note: This sermon was preached on a day when a number of new disciples were joining our congregation. As well, Finn Christopher Lilienthal received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Joining a congregation can be a daunting enterprise. Those already in the congregation can appear like vultures just waiting to swoop down upon you. In a previous congregation I served, I recall a gentleman worshiping with us for the first time. He had a handsome singing voice. He wasn't trying to out-sing everyone else, but he did sing with confidence, so it was noticeable in that small sanctuary. He later told me that one of the first things said to him that day was not "Welcome to Christ Lutheran" or "Hello, I'm so-and-so. Your name is?" or "Come have coffee with us in the social hall!" but something like this: "We could use you in our choir." A compliment, most assuredly. But a trifle self-serving.

Be forewarned! Those kinds of expressions are common in the church. You don't even need to be a new person in the congregation to experience it. Watch out if someone comes up to you with desperation in their eyes, practically grabbing you by the collar, hoarsely shouting something like "We need someone to fill that vacancy on the ABC committee. Pleeeeee say you'll join it!"

The funny thing is, the opposite end of the spectrum is also represented in the church. You can be part of a congregation for several years, and there still will be folks who say, "Well, I don't know... he's pretty new. We ought to have someone on council who's been here longer and knows what's going on."

But the story of Pentecost in our lesson from Acts today takes those two extremes of church experience and smashes them to smithereens. Look at what happened there. The disciples of Jesus (by the way, they're also called "apostles," a title that describes those disciples who have been personally sent by the Risen Christ after Easter to preach his name)—these disciples/apostles told the story of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They spoke this Good News to Jews who were visiting the Holy City from all over the known world. And of course, these Jews on a religious pilgrimage would eventually go back home. Go back to the places where they lived and worked and raised families. Only now they would go back with the story of Jesus—God's mighty act of saving power through Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. The apostles who told them about Jesus in the first place didn't pigeon-hole these visiting Jews, make them stay in Jerusalem, but instead shared their Christian faith with them so they could go out and be disciples, too. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples in order for the story to be told by them, and then the Spirit could go fill up all these others who would move out from Jerusalem into the world.

When someone joins a congregation, the rest of us ought not pigeon-hole them into a particular ministry or assign them a certain role based on who they are, what they look like, the type of vocation they have, what **we** think their gifts are, or what **we** think **we** need. Maybe that guy with the handsome singing voice didn't want to be in the choir, but did want to do social ministry in the community or teach a class. Why should we suppose a new person coming to Trinity ought to fill that vacancy on the ABC committee when, if we learned a little more about them, we might discover they're really interested in what's happening with the XYZ ministry that we have here? And if we dialogue with them even further, we might discover they have an idea for ministry we haven't even attempted here yet. Shouldn't we all be about the task of discerning together, and encouraging one another to take up ministries that our hearts are Spirit-led to pursue?

And while we're at it, let's not suppose a newer person (and "newer" is relative) cannot serve in a leadership role at Trinity or be in the forefront of a ministry here. Let's not think a newer disciple (or a young disciple, for that matter) has nothing to offer until they reach a certain age or minimum number of years on our membership rolls. Those apostles who were filled with the Holy Spirit when that rush of wind blew into Jerusalem and the flames of fire touched them like blazing tongues---well, those apostles were mostly uneducated Galileans who probably only spoke a dialect known as Aramean, with maybe a smattering of familiarity with other local dialects or languages. What experience did they have for public ministry in Jesus' name? But that Holy Spirit, filling them with God's creative power, had them speaking the story of Jesus in languages they didn't know from places they never even heard of: Parthia, Cappadocia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, to name a few. Now, I highly doubt that Jesus, prior to his ascension, handed each of his apostles a CD-Rom of the Rosetta Stone language program: "Here, Peter, I want you to spend the next year learning Cappadocian ... oh, and Philip, you need to study up on Egyptian verbs. We'll have a quiz next week." Jesus called into existence a group of disciples who often looked as if they were ill-prepared and somewhat reluctant to walk Jesus' path and follow his ways, much less teach those ways to others. Yet he did call them into existence. His Spirit, which he promised would be sent to the disciples, was precisely what brought the church, God's church, into being. Full of all kinds of people with all kinds of differing gifts. All gathered in places where those differing gifts could complement each other. And all needed for God's great work in this world.

The story of Pentecost shows us each of us is needed to fill the vacancies in the church's ministry. Only, a lot of the time, you and I don't know exactly where those vacancies are. But God does. God filled those holes on the Day of Pentecost so every single Jew visiting Jerusalem could learn about his Son. God filled those holes with disciples who never planned for and weren't originally prepared to do those kinds of ministries.

Pastor Lillian Daniel wrote in the *Christian Century* magazine about a pivotal event in her life. It was Palm Sunday. She was slightly frazzled that day, to put it mildly. Her young son was hospitalized. Just diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, he would not be discharged until his mom could figure out how to give him daily insulin injections. So, here it was—Holy Week, 1,001 things to do, a Palm Sunday service to lead, and Pastor Lillian had to leave her son at the hospital because she was too squeamish to give him a shot. She felt like a failure—as a mother **and** as a

pastor. Waving palm branches and recalling Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was the last thing she wanted to do.

Oh—she also had to receive new members that day. One new member—a young man in the medical field—arrived extra early and cheerily asked her, “How are you this morning?” Pastor Lillian, caught completely off guard, didn't answer with her usual carefully controlled “Fine. How are you doing?” Instead, she said, “You know what, I'm not doing too great.” And she spilled out in brief, worried words what was happening with her son—and herself. Not the kind of thing you tell a new church member. That's as bad as desperately pleading they fill the vacancy on the ABC committee. That's the kind of thing that makes a new member back away.

But the young man didn't back away. He asked if it was Type 1 diabetes. He said he had Type 1. He said that's what compelled him to enter the medical field, so he could care for others who were ill. And then he said this strange, wonderful thing: “I think that's why I am joining the church today ... I'm going to be a friend to your son, and help you deal with this.”

Don't you see? That soon-to-be-new church member spoke gracious, loving, Christ-like, Spirit-filled words to Pastor Lillian, and it took them both by surprise. Why, it's like he spoke Cappadocian for the first time!

Pastor Lillian says that young man's friendship with her family changed their lives for the better. None of it would have happened if she hadn't been honest enough to admit her own fears. None of it would have happened if that young man hadn't entered the fellowship of that congregation. None of it would have happened without the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

God has placed you and me in this congregation and our communities to do specific ministries. He has placed you and me here at Trinity and in our neighborhoods and workplaces and schools where we are needed—not necessarily to fill the obvious holes, but maybe those holes where we are **really** needed. We just might not realize right away that's what God is doing. But God is doing that, promising the power of his Holy Spirit to prepare us for our work.

Just where are you needed, my new brothers and sisters in Christ? What wonderful gifts, Finn Christopher, will you discover in yourself in these years to come, as your parents raise you and teach you the faith, and all of us pray for you? If anything, be prepared to be completely surprised. And always remember that—as we say right at the top of our yellow *Trinity Today*—we believe it is no accident that you are here. **AMEN.**