

Acts 2:1-21

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

With our lesson from Acts tonight, it is almost as though we're going backwards. The past three weeks, especially, the first reading has been focussing on bringing the message of God's love to the Gentiles. First we had the story of Peter's vision with all the food that being made acceptable, or in faith lingo, all the food being made clean. Then Peter goes on to witness to a Roman centurion named Cornelius along with everybody in his household and all of his soldiers, all of these *Gentiles*, received the Holy Spirit. Then after they received the Spirit, Peter says, "Well, if they've received the Spirit, I've got to baptize them."

The next week we heard the story of Paul going to the Greek city of Philippi. There he shared the message of God's love with a Gentile woman named Lydia. Lydia, who not only became a believer, but she invited Paul and his entire entourage – Luke and Timothy and Silas – to stay at her house.

Last week we got a continuation of Paul's time in Philippi when we heard about Paul and Silas healing a demon-possessed girl. When they did that they were thrown in jail where they ended up sharing their faith not only with the other prisoners, but with the jailer as well – with this *Greek* jailer.

So we've been hearing about this outreach to the Gentiles. We've been witnessing the success of this outreach. And here, tonight, we have the nearly climactic, culminating event in which the twelve receive the gift of languages.

But the reason I started off saying it's as though we're working backwards because it's actually our passage tonight that *begins* the entire story in the book of Acts. It begins it. It doesn't end it.

The opening sentence of chapter two, the opening sentence of our lesson tonight, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." As with anytime we try to translate from one language to another, oftentimes you have to make a choice. The translator has a choice of which words will work best, or what words might work better than other words. And while, indeed, our translation "they were all together in one place" is indeed a good and faithful rendering of that sentence, my good friend Pastor John Teitman from St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in New Kingston pointed out to me this week, another possible way to translate this passage is "And in the fulfilment of the Day of Pentecost, they were all together at one time the same."

Have you ever been in a room that was just one color – floor, walls, ceiling, furniture? Have you ever been at a meeting, or a party, or on a trip, surrounded like people almost exactly like you? Now, on the one hand, that can be good. It's a stable experience to be surrounded and supported by folks who are just like ourselves. Yet, if we surround ourselves only with people like us, how then to do we minister to those from whom we are different?

"They were all together at one time the same." Now, remember, these fellows – and they were all fellows – they had been together for a long time. At the very end of

chapter one, they had just elevated one of their own to fill a vacancy that they had (one of their own had chosen to “downsize” himself, so to speak). They had chosen this guy named Matthias. They had set up this criteria from chapter one: “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” (Acts 1:21-22) That was the criteria they laid out for Judas’ replacement. And they chose someone just like themselves. Someone who had been with them from the start. Someone who had seen and taken part in and been with them in everything that had happened. They had chosen one of their own. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. They advanced from within their own ranks. There’s a lot of positive things to be said for that. He already knew the ropes. He didn’t need to learn the company line; he had it down pat. And that’s great – as long as you’re striving to reach folks who are just like you.

So there they are “all together at one time the same” and God has something else in mind. The apostles – do you know what that word means, *Apostolos* (that’s the Greek). Apostles? It means “ambassador.” It’s a representative, a spokesperson, a diplomat, an emissary, someone who goes out representing another person, another country, an ideal. So God gathers these ambassadors together to bless them. How does God choose to bless them? With the gift of sameness? No. God gives these emissaries the gift of language. And I’m not talking about the ability to have a silver tongue. The ability to always know what to say, or how to say, or to have the right words. God gives them the ability to go out into the world speaking the language of the peoples. And not just the language of the far-flung Jewish people, rather to speak the languages of the known world and then some. The New Testament world here, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya. Or to put it in terms that 21st century North Americans might understand, God gave them the ability to speak in the languages of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean – Greece, Turkey, Albania, Croatia, Italy, Spain, France. God gave them the ability to speak in the languages of Northern Africa, including Egypt, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, and central Africa including Ethiopia and Sudan. They could speak in the languages of the Middle East – Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, and of the Arab countries – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Even heading out east toward Asia through Iraq and Afghanistan, Pakistan, toward India, Nepal, Bangladesh.

“They were all together at one time the same.” There are so many ways that we are the same as the people of all those countries, and there are so many, many ways in which we are different. Yet as we have seen in these past weeks with our readings from Acts, God’s message of love and grace and forgiveness is for – those just like me? No. God’s salvation, God’s hand of grace extends out to everyone – those who are just like me, those who are sort of like me, and those really aren’t like me at all.

“When the Day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” We are gathered here tonight in one place. And we are in many ways the same. The message that we get from the book of Acts tonight, the message that we get from the Spirit descending on those apostles, those ambassadors, those emissaries, is that we are called to go forth from this place out into the world proclaiming that message in whatever language we can to everyone that we will meet.

Amen.

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