

5-24-26 sermon

Acts 2.1-21, 37-42

Happy birthday church! We're somewhere around 1993 years old, give or take a year. That's a lot of candles! Jesus has ascended to the realm of heaven, as we heard last week, and his disciples have stayed in Jerusalem as he told them to, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit, the new way Jesus will be with them. Now it is the feast of Shavuot – the day of Pentecost in Greek – the Jewish festival celebrating the wheat harvest. During the Second Temple period in which Jesus lived, the festival had become a celebration of the giving of the Ten Words at Mount Sinai, remembering the covenant the people made with the God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt. On the day of Pentecost, some of the people from all over the Roman empire who lived in Jerusalem heard the sound of rushing wind and a cacophony of voices coming from one area and went to investigate. Luke summarizes their astonishment at hearing their own languages being spoken with the long list of the peoples present. There are all kinds of interesting things to be said about that list, not least the fact that two of the people groups listed no longer exist, but we'll save that for another sermon.

In response to the sneers of some of those present, Peter addressed the crowd and tells them that no, these people aren't drunk, but that what they're hearing is the work of the Spirit – something the prophet Joel said would happen. And the prophet has said it wouldn't just be the usual suspects – the priests and temple leaders – it'd be ordinary folk, and here we are. And then – in a part of his speech that we didn't hear – Peter says this to the crowd:

“Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.”

Peter – who just two months ago had denied he even knew Jesus, now stands in front of a crowd and tells them they killed Jesus! wonder if he started looking for people in the crowd picking up stones. I wonder if he expected more sneering from the crowd at his words. I wonder if he had any clue of how they would actually react? “They were cut to the heart, and asked, “What should we do?”

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ

so that your sins may be forgiven; and you [too!] will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

“And those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 persons were added to their number.”

Now, the temptation might be to hear that number and be impressed by its size, but I don't think that's the point Luke is trying to make. Remember – it's the feast of Shavuot, the celebration of the covenant the people made with God at Sinai. A covenant they broke soon afterwards when they made an idol, a golden calf, such as they'd seen in Egypt. When

Moses saw that “the people were running wild,” he called out, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me,” and men from the tribe of Levi assembled to him. Moses told them to go through the camp and strike down these rebellious people, even their “brother, friend and neighbor.” Which they did, “and that day about three thousand of the people died.” And now, on the festival of Shavuot, thousands of years later, “about three thousand persons were added.” Whatever we may make of the texts in the Hebrew bible where we read that God calls people to commit violence – and that’s an important conversation to have – I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Luke describes what happened on Pentecost in a manner that brings to mind the golden calf scene. Which – I believe – invites us to consider the long, long arc of God’s redemption: what was lost thousands of years before, has now been found. And now, this morning, two thousand years later, Emily Howard will join the long, long line of people who have “repented and been baptized”! She will participate in the promise Peter named that day, “the promise which is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Godself.” The people who responded *that day* “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” and in just a few moments, that’s the exact same promise Emily will make in response to receiving the promise of God herself.

Last Sunday we baptized five of our young people. Every time I have the privilege of baptizing someone it evokes memories of all the other times I’ve done so in the past. The first person I baptized was my mum, in a water tank in the little Brethren church in which I grew up. The second person was my dad. Then one of my brothers, his wife and son in a river. Over the years I’ve baptized people in the sea, in swimming pools, in creeks and, occasionally, in church buildings. Neither Rebecca or I grew up in a tradition which baptized infants, so when we had our first child, Maggie, we had long conversations about whether we would baptize her, or let her choose baptism for herself later in life as we had done. What led to us deciding to baptize Maggie and Seth as infants was the way we baptized infants at Mercy Street, the church we were part of in Houston when our children were born. We’d bring the child into the middle of the room, and then everyone would circle around them. We’d lay hands on each other, so everyone was touching someone who was touching the child, and then we’d speak these words over them:

“You belong to God, and you belong to us.”

Then there’d be the formal questions of the parents before the baptism itself. But rather than the formal questions of the congregation that I’ll ask you in a few minutes, my co-pastor, Matt, or I would turn to the congregation and say something like this: “As Maggie grows up, she’s going to need to learn how to forgive. She’s going to need to learn how to *ask* for forgiveness. She’s going to need to learn how to make amends. And she’s probably not going to learn that from a sermon, or from reading a book. She’s going to learn that from watching you. From seeing you forgive one another. Or asking for forgiveness. Or making amends. She’s going to learn how to share her own experience, strength and hope, by hearing you do that. She’s going to learn how to live a life of service from watching you serve others. So will you re-commit to live your life in such a way that she will learn those lessons

by watching how you live?” Because that’s what it means to say you belong to us. That you’re family now. That’s what it means to commit to Emily as part of this congregation now, when I’ll ask you all this question this morning:

“Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ,  
promise to guide and nurture Emily by word and deed, with love and prayer?”

That’s how we *all* grow in and into our faith – together. By devoting ourselves “to learning, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” It begins by simply showing up when the church gathers to do those things, and continues as we show up *for* one another. It continues by taking the liturgy seriously, and carrying that out from this space into our lives through the week. So that we’re quick to acknowledge that we’ve hurt someone in some way. Quick to ask for forgiveness. Quick to make amends. All of which is what it means to “repent.” And just like in any family, not everyone will always be in a place to be able to do that at any given time. So we need one another, so that those of us who are in a place to be able to model that will do so, and those of us who need to be reminded that it *is* possible to do those things when we don’t seem to be able to, will be here to see it. As we rub elbows and shoulders week in and week out. Here in the Sanctuary, or in the Fellowship Hall. In the kitchen, or the library. In the Godly Play room or the choir room. In the classroom or the Mah Jong room. As we gather “to learn, to fellowship, to break bread and to pray.”

The people who came to Jerusalem to join its residents for Shavuot all those years ago, and who repented and were baptized, stayed for weeks afterwards, discovering what life in the community of the Spirit looked like, then went from Jerusalem to carry the Gospel to every corner of the Roman empire. And today, on the church’s birthday, 1,993 years later, give or take a year, we are those who have received that same promise and have committed to that same life. May we continue to do so with joy – and do so together.

Amen.