

“You, Too, Can Listen Deeply”

Acts 2:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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Today is fifty days after Easter. The prefix “pente” has to do with five or a multiple of five, as in pentagon, a shape with five equal sides.

On that first Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, disciples were gathered and praying. Religious pilgrims and travelers were also on the streets of Jerusalem for a Jewish religious celebration of thanksgiving. At some point, there’s a rush of wind. Among Jesus’ disciples, there’s chatter, talking, and singing. What’s remarkable / what’s miraculous is that the religious pilgrims and travelers who are near that room with open windows hear, listen, and understand something of God’s love in Jesus Christ! And ***they*** are amazed! We don’t really know if the disciples of Jesus were all that amazed. They were affected by God’s Spirit of love and servant-power known in Jesus. ***We don’t know what the disciples-of-Jesus’ sense or awareness of amazement actually was, but those near them were amazed at how they themselves were understanding something life-changing.***

“Wait a minute!” they said. “The people we are hearing tell of God’s love in Jesus are Galileans! They speak Aramaic. We don’t speak their language. They don’t speak ours. How are we understanding the essence of their story?”

Someone said years ago that ***the primary miracle of Pentecost is not in the speaking, but in the hearing / the listening, and therefore the understanding.*** (We’ll come back to that.)

What in the world happened there in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago fifty days after Jesus’ death and resurrection? What in the world happened? Am I, as a 21st century Presbyterian disciple of Jesus, supposed to ***want and desire*** to speak in spiritual tongues or utterances as if I were a member of the “Holy Ghost Power Pentecostal Fellowship”?

We may well not be able to know or to explain what exactly happened one morning in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago; but is there something that we can experience ourselves? Is there something with which we can identify in God’s time now, that is related to that first Pentecost? It may be speaking in spiritual utterances, but it may be that God’s speaking will be accomplished through you and me and others without the type of spiritual utterances which we associate with a so-called Pentecostal church group. Our celebration of Pentecost two millennia beyond that day in Jerusalem of which we read can leave us amazed both at what God’s Spirit does with and through our human lives, and our celebration of Pentecost today can leave us amazed at how both others ***and*** we hear and understand.

Currently, before or after an election, pollsters develop statistics about voter preferences based on the age, gender, ethnicity, religion, economic, and educational categories of the voters: So many of this category favor this candidate and so many

favor the other candidate. Favoring or preferring by category or similar experience, however, is not the essence of Pentecost for disciples of Jesus or for the rest of the world. ***Identifying with and understanding God's Spirit of grace and power is the essence of Pentecost, then and now and in the future.***

The verses we read about that first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection refer to verses from the Prophet Joel, verses from which our opening sentences in worship were drawn this morning. Joel lived and taught plus or minus 400 years before Jesus. Those verses refer to how God's Spirit of grace and power is active among God's people of various ages and genders: older and younger, male and female. That would be all of us: Older and younger, male and female (as Joel tells it) -- all! Here's a challenge both to (1) ***remember*** and (2) ***sense anew*** that there is more to life than my own self in the moment! There are others around with life experiences similar to and different from mine! And God's Spirit of grace and power works (!) that we might be guided and shaped both with and beyond our similarities and differences "to the glory" not of ourselves, but "to the glory of God."

This morning the church celebrates the professions of faith of three members of the 2008 Lent and Easter Confirmation and Commissioning Group. (Five were received last Sunday.) I remember the first Wednesday evening that the eight of them gathered back in January. I thought to myself afterward, "Well, o.k. It's a group. It's probably better not to expect too much." Yet over five months I've been amazed at their growth, somewhat as individuals, but equally, if not more, as a group. What led to my being amazed? Observing them; relating to them; and listening to them. The experience of being with them has been, for me, a Pentecost miracle in a significant way, with the miracle of some understanding for me occurring not in talking, but in listening.

Both this set of Scripture verses and this class of Jesus' disciples who happen to be young teens have additionally led me to remember numerous persons with whom I've crossed paths and who have given of themselves in such a way that God saw fit to help me "listen" to their words and their lives. AND this set of Scripture verses and this class of Jesus' disciples have blessed me with a hearing and understanding I did not anticipate as I was led to reconsider others older and younger, female and male through whom God's Spirit of grace and power have communicated and compelled my listening.

Those others have not necessarily been Galileans, anymore than I am a Parthian, Mede, Elamite, Mesopotamian, a Judean, Cappadocian, Pontian, or Asian, a Phrygian, Pamphylian, Egyptian, Roman, etc. I'm a small-town, country person from Central Texas, who has been blessed, when I think about it, to experience God's Spirit of grace and power through very different persons in situations when and where I never expected to experience what God intended and I did not anticipate. They have been Presbyterian and Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopalian. They have been Jewish and Muslim, Mormon, and Unitarian. They have been agnostic and atheist. They have been

Republican and Democrat; female and male; heterosexual and homosexual; older, younger, middle age; extroverts and introverts; scientists, artists, educators, and laborers; of European, African, Native American, Asian, and Australian background, from cities, villages, and wilderness areas.

When I was about 23 years old, I was privileged to cross paths with a young man who was born a Presbyterian. For the 25 years after we met, until he died too young at the age of 49, we would talk periodically. I would sometimes tell him of my being disappointed in this or that within the church, when people were arguing and accusing over matters that would probably embarrass Jesus. More than once he replied to me: "Foote, it's the Church of Jesus, for Christ's sake!"

"It's the Church of Jesus, for Christ's sake." My friend was an insightful critic of people and church and disciples' failings, including his own failures; and he never wanted to "give the church (or any person) a pass" on coming up short of Jesus teachings and life and ministry. He simply wanted to remind me that God in Jesus Christ was not finished and would not be finished in spite of "church" or people "coming up short" in given week, month, year, decade, or longer. He wanted to remind me that God's Spirit of grace and power is willing to work with both persons and institutions so we can grow beyond (1) our "selfness" and (2) our institutionality, both of which can be self-ish and narrow.

So how can we be more positive Pentecost disciples of Jesus than self-ish, unhealthy, and narrow? When we listen deeply. Remember: the heart and essence of this story is not our speaking in or our understanding unknown languages (or tongues). The heart and essence of this story is in listening deeply to others telling of their lives so we can hear God's Gospel Word in that interchange.

Someone may say, "Foote, you're talking about God's Word possibly being heard through the lives of those who are not Church-Christians." That's correct. Let us continually remember how, during that first Pentecost, the speakers were Jewish disciples of Jesus, mostly from Galilee, and the hearers were regional and international Jews. There's not a single "Church-Christian" in the entire story. God's boundaries continually expand beyond our sense of those boundaries. We today are "Church-Christian" hearers of the story and characters within the on-going story.

The challenge of Pentecost all the time is to listen deeply to the life stories and challenges of every other person. When we do, we will be growing beyond our own narrowness and failings. We will be hearing from God's Spirit of grace and power. We will be being moved along in a process of transformation. We will be being shaped into an authentic and healthier community: a "Church of Jesus, for Christ's sake"!

-- All honor and praise be to God.