

Sunday, May 31, 2020

Scripture Acts 2:1-15

Take a moment to remember a time when you felt like you “had church”. What do I mean by the feeling of having “had church”? Author Melva Wilson Coster, in the book African American Christian Worship said, “‘We really had church today’ is a familiar expression among African Americans following a Spirit-filled worship experience. The genius of Black worship is its openness to the creative power of God that frees and enables people regardless of denomination, ‘to turn themselves loose’.” “To have had church” doesn’t mean that you related well to the worship service theme, or that you really enjoyed every aspect of the worship service. It also doesn’t mean that you felt the worship service ran smoothly or that it was “well done”. The reminiscing I want us to do right now is on a worship service that you felt free... when you felt like you were able to let loose... that you came out of that worship service different than when you went in.

Have you “had church” in your life sometime? And do you seek to “have church” every time you enter into an opportunity to worship God?

On the first Pentecost, we could say that those gathered in the upper room “had church”! There was sound like a rush of a violent wind that “came from heaven”. There was the divided tongues, like fire appearing and resting on each who gathered. And each gathered, filled with the Spirit began to speak in other languages which was amazing and perplexing, that some who heard about this thought that they might be drunk.

If we take a moment to ponder about the first Pentecost we might now be filled with questions. Has the Holy Spirit changed since then, that it no longer is seen as tongues of fire or the rushing sound of violent wind or has our senses become dull that we are unable to experience that anymore? Does the Holy Spirit still come? Did the ability to speak in other languages just happen then and the Holy Spirit ceased to do that anymore? Or was that a onetime gift that was never repeated and will not be repeated again? Have we as recipients of the Holy Spirit learned to control our reaction to being filled with the Spirit that others don’t mistake us as being drunk or do we ever as hosts carrying the Holy Spirit ever react in a way that looks like we are “under the influence”? Do we still have people being filled with the Holy Spirit like the first Pentecost?

The common understanding among scholars is that the book of Acts is the continuation of the gospel of Luke as similar themes and style run across both of those books of the Bible. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, one of the themes seems to be of God's faithfulness being fulfilled through Jesus, while the book of Acts continues with God's faithfulness being fulfilled through the sending of the Holy Spirit.

This Pentecost Sunday, we also attest to God's faithfulness in our lives. Though many of us have a difficult time explaining the Holy Spirit, we sure can feel the Spirit moving even during this time of limited outdoor activities or social gatherings. God continues to give messages of hope, teaching, comfort, challenges, and inspirations of God's word through your pastors and in Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and devotional times. The Holy Spirit continues to nudge us to care and connect with one another, gives us words to pray, and gives us hunger to grow in love with God and others. God continues to be faithful in our lives as we can experience an odd sense of peace in this time of chaos as many of you shared, that you experienced comfort in knowing that you are not alone in this difficult time. And some of you shared that you have experienced healing and joy that doesn't cease to exist even during this storm. We cannot deny that the Spirit is moving and touching us in powerful ways through the music shared by Scott on Facebook twice a week and in so many other ways. As Pentecost is about celebrating God's faithfulness through the sending of the Holy Spirit, can we acknowledge and celebrate God's faithfulness to us now? Oh YES! Could we "have church" outside of the sanctuary for Pentecost to celebrate God's faithfulness? Oh yes!

The first Pentecost in Acts took place during one of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals which calls all Jews (male) to travel to Jerusalem. Pentecost, also known as "the Feast of Weeks" celebrated the time Moses received the Laws on Mount Sinai, on the 50th day after the Passover. It usually fell at the beginning of June, when the conditions were best to travel so this festival was as international as it can get, gathering crowds in Jerusalem from the farthest places of the world.

Though an influx of Jews gathered from numerous places all around the world by this time, they still only spoke 2 languages, Arabic and Greek. They would not have been speaking the ancient languages because there was no use for them at this time. Those languages would have been lost by the lack of use, hidden and even forgotten. So the Holy Spirit giving them the ability to speak these ancient languages was truly a miraculous act of God, bringing out that which was hidden. The amazement and perplexing aspect of this was that many of them who received this ability and many who observed it had not known they had this within them.

Does the Holy Spirit still work like this? Oh YES! Those moments of serving others to exhaustion but the strength and joy in serving continues, in times when you didn't think a certain skill was in you but you surely handled a difficult situation well, or when you "usually don't do certain things" but you did it...could that be the Holy Spirit bringing something out of you which you didn't think you had? When you took on a leadership position, when you stepped outside of your comfort zone, when you speak out against what is wrong, when you speak for the voiceless, when you give what you thought you didn't have...could that be the working of the Holy Spirit that brings out what you think you didn't have, which you didn't know you could do? How about those times when you do things that are at odds with the rest of the world, forgive instead of holding a grudge, giving instead of just taking, standing up for what is right instead of being a bystander or a passerby, when you call out what is wrong and speaking the truth instead of hiding and denying them. When we can't help but to do these things that love God and others...when others think you're crazy (or under the influence in other words) for doing what is just, loving, and kind, aren't these what people filled with the Holy Spirit do? Does the Holy Spirit still work the same way it did on the first Pentecost? Oh Yes!

This story of Acts chapter 2 happens to be paired with a story in the Old Testament, the story of the tower of Babel found in Genesis chapter 11 because of the role language had in each of these stories. In the story in Genesis, the people had one language and were determined to stay that way and to make themselves great by building a tower. Then God saw their determination and to deter them from their goal, God gave them all different languages which made them abandon the tower project and scattered upon the land. This story of the tower of Babel and Pentecost can be seen as a reversal in that the languages given did the opposites in the stories. The language of the Tower of Babel story scattered the people so that they couldn't build a tower for themselves, but the language of the Pentecost was given TO BUILD a kingdom of God. The Pentecost story celebrates diversity for a common purpose, to sing praises to God.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church when God through the Holy Spirit's act of bursting diversity from its hidden state. As we celebrate the act of God through the Holy Spirit, we also celebrate diversity. This is the time to discover gifts and talents, to uncover what we hid within ourselves, and to acknowledge that the things that make us unique is what God had intended in the birthing of the church!

This week, we have been disturbed again with hatred growing rampant in our nation. Over and over again we see powers of groups and individuals trying to “kill” diversity. But we who celebrate Pentecost today remember what God intended in the church...diversity as a gift that is meant to declare God’s power and goodness. May the Holy Spirit continue to bring out of us hidden gifts that makes us unique, that continues to sing of God’s goodness and faithfulness, that continues to equip us to love God and others more, and to celebrate that which makes us all unique as the church God birthed in Diversity!

On Pentecost, and the “feast of Weeks” the celebration of God’s law given was celebrated along with the first harvest of barley as people brought their offering of 2 loaves of bread made with barley. This not only fed the temple workers but it fed the poor, the widows, and the orphans. As we celebrate the birth of the church, we continue the tradition of giving thanks to God for the harvest of blessings we experience daily and to bring that gift to God in thanksgiving which in turn also feeds the needs of the many. We also offer to God our lives, what we call the living sacrifice. Please consider ways you can be giving yourselves in service to others in safe ways, as well as being involved in the now virtual adult Sunday school and other small groups gatherings, and consider dedicating your financial resources to God through the church through giving by mail, website, or by text. The information is below and on our website. Thank you as always for joining us in the Ministry with Jesus.