

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

Acts 2: 1-21

May 31, 2000

Rev. Robin Sherman

Happy Birthday everyone! Yes, I said happy birthday and no you did not miss something. Today we celebrate Pentecost; that day when we celebrate the birth of our Christian Church. That day so many years ago when it is said that the Spirit of God, the Advocate of God came to the people, showering them with the Spirit. Invoking in them a kind of love that permeates and becomes palpable around the room. It cannot be contained, it is beyond their ability to hold it in. Yes it is a time of celebration in the church. God is here! Alive, among us, within us, all around us, in all of creation including: the people, the animals, the plants and the rocks, the trees and the stars.

We cannot keep from singing, our joy is too great to be contained...God is on the loose!

Last weekend over 300 people joined together in Pembroke Ontario to celebrate God's church in the Bay of Quinte Conference of the United Church of Canada; to do the business of the Church, to show off the work of the Church, to sing and dance and debate and disagree and to come to consensus and to acknowledge our shortcomings and to celebrate new life and old friends. God was there, on the loose when at 9:30 Saturday night the youth at Conference led the group on a line dance, a chain of people singing and dancing to We are marching in the Light of God.

We could not keep from singing, our joy is too great to be contained...God is on the loose!

There were times of quiet reflection, during worship and prayer; when we remembered those who had died in this past year, when we honoured our God in praise and thanksgiving and when we took time on the court floor when the debate became too intense...to sit for a moment in quiet, to ready ourselves for the vote that would determine our direction.

We cannot keep from singing, even in our quiet moments our song quieted but still there. God was with us in the silence, moving through us, among us. God is on the loose!

These are some of the sights and sounds of the Bay of Quinte Annual Conference Meeting of the United Church of Canada. Young and old, male and female, gay and straight, lay and ordered singing, praying, working together; not unlike those who met on that day of Pentecost 2,000 years ago. The writer of Acts tells us the Spirit filled the room and they understood, each in their own language what God was asking them to do. We hear the word of God each in our own language, interpreted in our own language, our own way of understanding. In many ways the United Church of Canada takes this to heart. We do not read the scripture, the word of God, so literally that we cannot hear it in our own language for today; instead we believe the word is open for

interpretation, to be questioned, to be dissected, to come alive within us. This is our Pentecost; to hear the word of God, to be moved by the Spirit of God among us.

We cannot keep from singing, our joy is too great to be contained...God is on the loose!

In 2006 the United church introduced a new document to speak to the people of this church in this day and age; in this time and place. It is called a Song of Faith. It follows the Basis of Union written in 1926; the Statement of Faith brought out in the 40's and The New Creed written in 1968. Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit is in movement. There is not one document that remains unchanged for all years to come. This includes our Bible as well. Although not added to since about the 14th Century, the Bible has undergone a number of changes over the years and in our age it is interpreted for our world in 2009 throughout mainline churches all over the world.

God's faithfulness remains constant but our way of understanding moves because we move and change and we are guided by the Holy Spirit. Jesus came as flesh to show us the God we could not see or comprehend; a God who wanted us to have a new understanding of a faithful and loving God not a God to be feared. The great I Am. I Am - God with you asking my people to do only one thing – to love one another as I have loved you.

A Song of Faith does the same thing for our day and age. It moves us through the Holy Spirit into a new century for a new people. Using images we can understand in our time and place. As it says in the preamble, "This statement of faith attempts to reflect the spirit of The United Church of Canada and to respond to various defining elements in our social, political, and historical context, including the place of the church in society, the cultural and intellectual setting in which we find ourselves, the meaning of "truth", the impact of the market economy on our daily lives, and the growing issue of the meaning of "security". This Song of Faith is not unlike the book of Acts and Romans we read from this morning, telling the story of a people of faith in their time and place.

A Song of Faith begins like this,
"God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description.
Yet in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship."

The Holy Spirit does not stay quiet and still. That day 2,000 years ago the people who heard the noise came running and realized that even though they could not understand each other they understood what was being said. Verse 11 tells us, "They're speaking our languages, describing God's works!" And finally the people understood; once it was put in their own languages.

Our reading this morning tells us there were at least 14 different cultural groups gathered that day hearing at least 14 different languages, none of which would have been English. We lose sight sometimes of the fact that the language Jesus spoke no longer exists. The writings left to us that form our Bible are not the language Jesus spoke. Jesus spoke a form of Armenian that no longer exists. Our scriptures were

written down in Hebrew and Greek. The words we use today are our interpretation of what we thought the Hebrew and Greek meant. Some of the words in today's Bible had to be added because there was no existing word to translate to. Any of you who speak other languages will know that some words in English just don't translate into other languages and vice-versa.

A Song of Faith reads like a song. When I first read it I was struck at how it reminded me of the Psalms. Of course the Psalms were written as songs that could be sung during worship. They included songs of love, lament, anger, despair, and longing. We, for the most part only read them. A Song of Faith can be sung or read in the same way. It moves and flows like the Holy Spirit moves and flows within and among us.

We cannot keep from singing when the Spirit is moving and guiding us. Our joy is too great to be contained. Our love of God and one another is too great to be dismissed. It is God's hope for us to continue to move and to be guided by the Spirit to do the work of God in the way Jesus taught us.

As the church born so many years ago, we continue to sing a song of faith in this way:

"We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ as a community of broken but hopeful believers, loving what he loved, living what he taught, striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place.

Our ancestors in faith bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living; upon their lives our lives are built.

Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints, experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it, helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition, challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth."

"Grateful for God's loving action, we cannot keep from singing.

Creating and seeking relationship, in awe and trust, we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love."

Amen.