

## PENTECOST C

May 23, 2010

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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*Acts 2:1—21*    *Psalm 104:24—34, 35b*    *Romans 8:14—17*    *John 14:8—17*

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Someone once said the church is somewhat like a football huddle, the huddle that players go into at a football game. You know that something important is being said there, but you can't understand a word of it, and all you can see is their rear ends.

But in all fairness to the church, we must admit that it isn't easy to be understood by the world. After all, what we are talking about, in this huddle called "church," is God. That's hard to talk about.

It is not an uncommon occurrence for me to ask a group of laypeople how many of them have talked about their faith recently. It is also not an uncommon occurrence for none or only one of them to say they've shared their faith with someone.

But in all fairness, it is hard to talk about God. When we speak of God's mystery, words fail. How do we find the words to describe that being, that deep experience that is so often indescribable?

And, there are powerful forces against speaking about God. Years ago William Buckley said, “You may be able to bring up the subject of religion at a fancy dinner party once, but if you bring it up twice during the evening, you won’t be invited back.”

There are powerful forces in our culture to keep religion private, personal. We don’t want to be showy, wear our faith on our sleeve. We don’t want to be accused of pushiness, so we find it very hard to speak about God.

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, says that on the day of Pentecost, a day when Jews celebrated the gift of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch – that is, the words of God given to humanity through the Bible – that Jews from every nation were gathered in one place. They must have had trouble understanding one another because, even though they all shared the same faith, they were separated by different languages.

Well, the Spirit descends, people begin to talk, people begin to hear, people in that room said, “How is it possible that I am able to hear and to understand you, even though I speak a different language?”

It was a miracle.

It is a miracle the church now calls Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit descended in Acts 2, people started to speak. Jews from every nation began telling of the “mighty works of God” in such a way that they were understood. The Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost brings things to speech, makes ordinary people into preachers.

Back at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus began his ministry, do you remember what he said? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Why is the Spirit upon him? Jesus answers that as he continues to quote from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the captives, deliverance to the oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind.” The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus, so that he might preach.

In Luke, and in Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, people get the Holy Spirit in order to speak.

Not infrequently people ask me how I feel getting up in front of a crowd and speaking every week. In all honesty, if I stop to think about what I am doing my hands begin to shake, I start to sweat, and my knees get weak. Even after doing this for several years, speaking in public still scares me.

I'm therefore not surprised to find out that, when people are asked what human activities they fear the most, right there at the top of the list is public speaking. It is frightening to speak before a crowd.

And when the speaking is about God, then it is even more frightening. How many times have I as a pastor been amazed when we ask someone who is accustomed to speaking in public on a regular basis to read the scripture on a Sunday morning. As I sit here and watch, I can see the person's knees and hands shaking. That seems odd because here is a person who ought to be thoroughly accustomed to speaking in public. But this is public speaking of a different kind. This is public speaking about God, and that is very different and frightening speech.

William Willimon tells a story about once talking to a state judge. The judge was relating some of the history of the clothing that judges wear. He said that in the early days of our Republic, American judges made a big deal of not wearing wigs or robes. People in places of legal authority had a bad name to some of the American revolutionaries, and they didn't want to identify with that. But as years went by, and we moved into the Nineteenth Century, judges started putting on robes in order to preside at court and make their judgments. Why? The judge said, "When you are going to stand in judgment on somebody's life, you need all the help you can get. That robe helps you to get words out of your mouth."

That story helps me to put all the trappings of church into perspective. Things like robes, stoles and pulpits... I need all the help I can get, if I'm going to stand up here and speak for God!

But you are laypeople... What should you care about any of this? What is it to you? You pay me to preach the Gospel. You might have, on occasion, spoken at church or read the scripture, but I am the preacher and you are the congregation. Right? WRONG!

It's like Martin Luther said: "Everyone, by virtue of baptism, is called to preach." All baptized Christians are expected to speak the Gospel to their neighbors, to testify to the mighty works of God, to tell people about Jesus. The thing is, on Sunday morning, we can't all possibly speak at the same time and be understood, so some of the baptized are designated to be preachers. They are the ones who speak on Sunday morning so that the rest of us may speak about Jesus Monday through Saturday. The preacher preaches, so that the congregation may preach.

Like it or not, if you are a Christian, you are called to bear witness, to testify to the hope that is within you, to tell people about Jesus. I admit that I have an easier task of being a preacher than you have of being a preacher.

When I speak, I am protected by all the “stuff” of doing church: the robe, the stole, the pulpit. Everybody here is together in order to praise God, to hear scripture, and hear the Word preached. I don’t have to ask you for permission; that is why we are here.

But tomorrow, when you get into the classroom, the board room, the office, or over the kitchen table, preaching can be more difficult. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, you are able to preach. That’s one of the main points of this second chapter of Acts. Jesus had been raised from the dead, shown to be Lord and Savior, but nobody knew how to talk about it, few possessed the courage to speak of such a thing. Then the Holy Spirit descended, and things were brought to speech. People began to talk to one another, then to talk to people out in the streets.

As Peter said in today’s reading, “All of this was predicted by the prophet Joel. In former days, God’s Word was spoken only by the Prophets, a few charismatic or at least offensive individuals who are called to speak the truth, to speak up for God.”

But the prophet Joel foretold a day when, “I will pour out my Spirit on all, upon the young and the old, upon women and men, maids, janitors, everybody. Everybody is going to get to tell of the mighty works of God.”

That promised outpouring of the Spirit, that turns otherwise quiet people who are not good on their feet into preachers, has now occurred. The Spirit is being poured out, and great is the company of the preachers who go forth into the world to speak.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, to preach...” And so, dear congregation, be open to the Spirit, be ready to give an account of the faith that is within you, when the time is right. Get out there and preach! The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, to preach deliverance to the captives, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord when God shall save God’s people.

Let us pray. Lord, you have assembled us, by the power of your Holy Spirit. You have spoken to us your words of life, and they take root in our lives by the power of the Spirit. Give us the strength we need to be your spokespersons, to speak empowered by your Spirit. Each day we encounter people who do not know the story of your love in Jesus Christ. Every day we meet those whose only glimpse of your power to transform will be through observation of us and our actions. Help us to be your prophets. Make us bold to speak your truth, in love. Empower us to speak, in your name. Amen.

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*This sermon is taken in large part, and contextualized as appropriate, from a sermon preached by the Rev. William H. Willamon at the Duke University Chapel on May 23, 1999.*