

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Day of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21

Deeper, Broader, Higher

Most often, and at their best, birthdays and anniversaries are happy occasions. They mark the passing of years since a particular event in the time line of history. In the case of a birthday, the day in the calendar points back or looks back to that point in time, that date, when it all started with a birth. They occasion the opportunity to observe the changes since the birthday was last celebrated. When young children are growing up, in many families the child's height is measured and recorded on a doorframe or wall in the house providing clearly visible progress and growth toward adulthood. It's fun to look back at the measurement points in the years leading up to the present with comments like, "Wow! You've really grown taller this year." or "It's hard to believe that you were so little just a few years ago." Another way to mark the changes is to look at photos from previous birthdays.

Facebook has a feature that seems to know just when to bring back a memory with a photo and post from your time line 1, 2, 3 or more years ago on a particular day to remind you what you found notable. Sometimes these are birthdays, but more often they're posts that the Facebook algorithms have determined are other occasions worthy of an anniversary mention. And like so many other online systems, these algorithms are getting better and better all the time at making these determinations. Sometimes they're almost uncanny.

Anniversaries can be like birthdays, marking the annual remembrance of a wedding or some other happy significant occasion. And on such anniversaries similar nostalgic recollections can accompany them with the resulting comparison to the current reality with the initial event. Looking at wedding photos, for example, can often evoke expressions of wonderment that the couple could at the time fit into clothing several sizes smaller than they can today.

It should be mentioned that anniversaries can also be times to take note of a particular dark time in history—the start of a war, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the assassinations of public figures like Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While they mark a somber historical moment, they are deemed to be memories that should never be forgotten since they influenced the course of history in a profound way.

As people of Christian faith, we are very good at these anniversary and birthday celebrations. In fact the whole annual cycle in the church revolves around a series of such dates—all of which, by the way, are related to the time line of the life of Jesus. The birth of Jesus at Christmas and the resurrection of Jesus on Easter are the 2 biggies! So big are they that they have been woven into the fabric of the culture of our nation and of other nations that have strong Christian roots.

One of the challenges of these cultural appropriations of Christian observances is that their true meaning can become obscured or diluted. This comes to the fore every Christmas when we have to work hard to keep the incarnation of God in baby Jesus and the events of his birth pre-eminent over the less sacred elements of snowmen and reindeer and elves and Santa and holly and ivy and snowflakes and Christmas Trees and on and on an on. And then at Easter we have to work as hard to keep the empty cross high above the chicks and bunnies and eggs and flowers and candy and on and on and on.

The way we do this, of course, is to read the stories over and over again—the testimony of the Bible is what keeps us on track with understanding the first time and understanding again. The annual observances are times to renew our connection with their true meaning.

Today is another of those anniversaries in the life of the church—the Day of Pentecost. So far, Pentecost has not been appropriated by the wider culture. In the life of secular people, today is just another beautiful springtime Sunday—a great time to get out and run and play and revel in the leisure of the weekend. It's highly unlikely that if you stopped someone walking their dog on Pete's Hill this morning that they'd be able to tell you today is anything other than another Sunday.

So as we observe Pentecost today we don't have to rise above cultural appropriation like we do at Christmas and Easter. That said, it's really important that those of us within the Christian church recall the remarkable significance of Pentecost. Unfortunately, casual Christians may not realize just how important is the event that is recalled today.

Sometimes Pentecost is called the birthday of the Christian church. This is the day that Jesus had promised would come—the day that the Holy Spirit arrived in the rush of a violent wind and infused the followers of Jesus with a fiery fervor, voluminous vigor, and confidence like they had never had before. From this day on, the good news of Jesus' resurrection was no longer for just those who had known Jesus before he died and rose. Now this good news was for the whole world.

Because this event happened on Pentecost, there was an especially large diversity of people in Jerusalem. We're even given a list: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. This extensive and seemingly exhaustive list is key to understanding the immensity of the power of this event. All of these people, no matter what their language, were able to understand what it was the disciples of Jesus were saying. It was not a spiritual glossolalia—speaking in unintelligible tongues. No. It was the good news of God's love in Jesus being communicated in such a way that everyone, *everyone*, was able to hear and understand as if they were hearing it in their first language.

This is really significant. On Pentecost it becomes absolutely clear that the Christian message of God's love in Jesus knows no bounds. No one is excluded. It is for everyone, without exception, to hear and then believe. New Testament scholar Margaret P. Aymer puts it this way, “. . . Pentecost gives power to the band of Jesus followers to speak the languages of the world, to tell the gospel in every language. The early church was to bear witness to the ends of the earth in the languages of the people of the world; on the day of Pentecost, Christianity became a religion with a divine sanction to multilingualism and to translation.” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Vol. 3*, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., 2010 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 17)

Even though it's not in the verses we read this morning, if you go on a little farther in Acts chapter 2, we read in verse 41, “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day three thousand persons were added.” In one day, the followers of Jesus went from a hundred or so to over 3,000. And thus began the growth and spread of the gospel message that eventually made it all around the entire globe.

Ever since that day, the church of Jesus Christ has been on the move becoming winsome and attractive to people of every kind and culture.

And, ever since that day, the human beings who make up the church of Jesus Christ have more often than not gotten hung up on this boundary-less inclusiveness of the power of God's Holy Spirit. More often than not, I'm afraid, the people of God have attempted to rein in the stunning and surprising all-inclusive love of God for all of God's people. It's unwieldy to think that God really meant everyone when everyone was intended. It's uncomfortable when the diversity of God's people is so vast that it's too hard to tell who's in and who's out. When we have forgotten the broadness beyond our comprehension, but well within God's comprehension, we become a stumbling block to the power of the spirit of the Day of Pentecost.

My friends, this human narrowing of God's inclusivity has taken many forms over the centuries since that first Pentecost. Those inside the church community while having the best of intentions have fallen to the temptation to fabricate limits and boundaries that are not intended by God. Early on it was on whether or not the good news of God's love was available only to Jews. There were those who insisted that one had to become a Jew first before one could become a Christian. Across the ages one distinction after another was erected and then dismantled when the Pentecost story was read again and understood again. Distinctions based on race and gender have been eliminated, bringing us closer to the day when the fullness of God's inclusive love is declared.

In our day in our culture today we are witnessing well-meaning Christians falling again to this temptation as they cling to false distinctions based on ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation, gender identity, and anatomy.

It's time for an anniversary observance where we look back and remember what it was all about the first time, and what that is all about for our time. The Pentecost story is all about the limitless extent of God's reach. It's time for God's people to once again embrace the stunning diversity and variety with which God has blessed the world and in which God delights. We too can become delighted as well, if only we will remember the story of Pentecost.

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'" (Acts 2:37-39)

Let us pray. God we have been startled again by the truth of your limitless love for all. May this Day of Pentecost be a day in which we renew our resolve to hold to this amazing truth. Help us to be worthy ambassadors of your love that is deeper, broader and higher than we can ever even imagine. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.