

Sermon on Acts 2:1-21; John 8:14-17,25-27
Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So, happy birthday, Church! By the way, you're looking quite good for 120 years old! Or, should I say, rather, 2010 years old? For the story of the Church today is not just that of this congregation, as we celebrate our 120th anniversary of existence. It is our story within the longer story of the whole Christian Church these past two thousand some years. And it's not just a story about our past and present. The story of Pentecost includes the future, what God has in store for us, and the power of the Holy Spirit that God has given to us today to help make our present and future witness possible, through the gift of faith.

The story starts long before recorded history, from the stories of Creation passed down by oral tradition from generation to generation, like those of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and the Tower of Babel. Grandparents and elders shared these stories with children and adults around ancient campfires. The story of Pentecost has its roots in that ancient story told of how human beings once tried to build a tower that would reach to the heavens. Perhaps it's a symbol of how humans try to reach God ourselves, or get to heaven by our own effort and work. But it seems likely that the higher humans reached in this effort, as the tower climbed higher brick by brick and stone by stone, the more people may have argued and competed amongst each other. The story says that God confused the peoples' languages, so that they could no longer communicate with one another, and so they gave up their efforts to build this tower to heaven. Ancient peoples said that this is why people speak in many different languages, and why we live separate from one another in different tribes or nations. The tellers of this story say that our separation by language and borders is a consequence of our trying to reach too high, to be like God, and it came following the Fall of humankind into sin. We have been separated ever since, and we create more and more boundaries and walls between ourselves! But this is not our natural created condition; for once we all were one people, speaking one language. Many centuries later, the prophet Isaiah had a vision, a dream, in which the many peoples created by God, of many nations and languages, would be brought together by God on one holy mountain. This was the vision and hope, that one day all people would be one, once again.

So on the first day of Pentecost, 50 days following Easter, and 10 days after the Ascension of our Lord in to heaven, the gift that Jesus had promised to his disciples was given. On that day, they were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. We heard in our first lesson the story of how the Holy Spirit suddenly

entered the room, with the sound of a mighty wind that filled the house. Tongues of fire appeared on their heads, and being thus filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability. Wow! Can you imagine what that must have been like?

It so happened that many people, devout Jews from many nations, were in Jerusalem at the time on pilgrimage, to observe the Jewish feast of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, called *Shavuot* (when the Law was given at Sinai). These people heard the disciples speaking in their languages, which astonished them, because the disciples were Galileans, not known for having such abilities. Some scoffed, “they’re filled with new wine!” [For there were cynics even in the first century!] But Peter replied that they were not drunk, but filled with the Holy Spirit, and that they prophesied in fulfillment of the prophet Joel’s words. What the disciples did with their new abilities was to proclaim the good news of God’s love in Christ Jesus to people gathered from many nations, in languages they had never learned. Many languages were spoken not to confuse, but to make clear a new and unifying word from God: “that everyone who called on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (In any language they spoke!) Many languages made God’s grace in Christ Jesus intelligible to more people, from many nations. It didn’t matter what tribe you were from, what nation, or even what “religion” you came out of. Pentecost was the Tower of Babel in reverse!

Fast forward to the end of the nineteenth century. Immigrants from many nations settled in the United States to start a new life, some for religious freedom, some for a new economic start. People came from many countries in northern Europe and from across this nation to take up roots in Minnesota. One group of mostly German immigrants settled here in St. Paul, and started a church where they could worship and pass on the Lutheran faith in the English language. They chose the language of their new country, and not of their homeland, for the sake of their children. It was 1890 when they founded the congregation, to be called “The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer”, down the hill and closer to downtown and the river. In 1911 they moved on up the hill and built a new church here on this spot, located in an area where many new homes, businesses and churches were being built. And for many years they thrived, as part of the English District of the Missouri Synod, with close connections to Concordia College. This church drew students, faculty, and many families from the surrounding community who could walk to worship on Sundays, and find a welcome home with people who were in many ways “just like them”, who sang familiar hymns and chorales from the German Lutheran tradition.

Over the years things began to change. After World War II people became more mobile; they began to drive their own cars and live in homes farther away from the church. Some even began joining other Lutheran churches that were built

to serve those who lived in new suburbs north and south. Then the freeway came in, Interstate 94, cutting a path through the center of the business community, and more people moved away. This part of St. Paul began to decline economically, which had a profound effect on the congregation. At about the same time, African American families who lived in the neighborhood started to worship here at Redeemer, attended Sunday School and Bible School, and found themselves welcomed. By the 1950s and 1960s Redeemer was becoming racially integrated – when much of the nation was experiencing racial upheaval and division over civil rights. In the 1970s immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia started arriving in St. Paul, and several families from Laos, known as the Hmong, were sponsored by this congregation. Although by that time Redeemer was experiencing economic hardship just like the community around it, the congregation also began to discover its heart – as they learned how to welcome strangers (who were not German, or even Lutherans) and open their doors to the community around them. But it wasn't a quick and easy lesson, and we've experienced many bumps along the way.

Now, in the year 2010, 120 years after the founding of this congregation, we find that “the nations of the world have come to St. Paul!” Across the street we have neighbors from most every nation in the world: Hmong immigrants from Laos or Vietnam, Muslims from Somalia or other Africa countries, African-Americans from other American cities, new neighbors from Mexico, El Salvador, Eastern Europe, you name it! Many of these neighbors have no idea who Lutherans are, or what goes on inside this place. We are as much a mystery to them as they are to us! In more recent years young adults have begun to rediscover the city, especially the residential apartment areas on Selby and Grand Avenue with shops and restaurants, and they also have begun to move in. Some have even begun to visit us and explore our worship space on Sundays! They may speak English, but may not share our same old “Lutheran language of faith.” We have had to find new ways to communicate through the internet, with e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and webpage advertising. We have added a few new songs to our repertoire of hymns, and have tried to find new ways to welcome visitors and strangers. For it's a whole new Pentecost opportunity for the Church!

As we celebrate our 120 years of ministry here, and go further into the 21st century, we will have many new neighbors to meet and new languages to learn. We will have to open ourselves up to new opportunities to change and grow, in order to show hospitality and make connections with our neighbors. For gracious hospitality is becoming one of the most important marks of a vital congregation, and finding ways for people to connect their faith with what goes on in their lives and in the world – to help Christians learn how to live gracefully and to do justice – is fast becoming the most effective way to “do evangelism” and bear witness to the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The past two days a few of us from Redeemer (Myrna Nelson, Emmanuel Hughes, Art Gaard and myself) took part in the annual Saint Paul Area Synod Assembly at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville. During this time lay leaders and pastors from 100 Lutheran congregations in Saint Paul met with each other and our bishop Peter Rogness to worship, pray, and discuss ways in which can more effectively reach out to our neighbors with love, and be witnesses to God's justice in the world. We were reminded again how the nations of the world have indeed come to St. Paul, how our surrounding culture has changed because of new media and electronic communications (and how much our evangelism and witness will thus have to change as well). In order to survive and to grow as a Church, we will have to both learn how to communicate and build relationships cross-culturally, with persons from very different backgrounds than our own. And we will have to find new ways to connect with young people, to help them find through the Church a community of faith that will welcome them, and give them opportunities to connect faith with values that matter to their lives in the world.

It's both a challenging time and an exciting time to be the Church, with both failure and growth the possible results of whatever we do! We can hold on to old ways and die, or take some risks and "leaps of faith" by seeking new ways to bear witness to Jesus Christ. But there's one thing that should keep us all hopeful in all this: God is faithful, and has promised to be with us through the presence of His Son, and to give us power and faith in this witness through the Holy Spirit. And it has always been true that the most effective witness of all has been "to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself". If we do that, we cannot fail! The main thing is to keep the faith and put our trust in God, who has promised to give us life, and who makes our witness bear fruit in God's own time. This is all that our ancestors did here 120 years ago when God used them to found this Church, and look at all that has been accomplished over the years!

So thanks be to God for all the goodness that God has done through the faith of many people in this Church, to build this congregation, nurture faith in children, and reach out with love to the community and world around us. Today our prayer must be that God will continue to do good and powerful things through us, and that we, too, will be faithful vessels through which God's light will shine and God's love will be shown in word and deed. May God's Holy Spirit give us the power of faith to go out and share this love with all God's children. Then, one day, everyone shall call on the name of the Lord, peace will reign on earth, and we shall all know God's love and have life forever in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.