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Acts 1:1-5, 2:1-4 -- All Together Now

Last week we celebrated Ascension Sunday, hearing of Jesus' last appearance to the disciples in the Gospel of Luke. We pick up the story this morning in the second volume of Luke's writing, also known as the Book of Acts. We begin with Luke reviewing the ascension for Theophilus, the one to whom he is writing. Hear now these words from Act chapter 1:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Following the ascension, the disciples remained in Jerusalem and for the next ten days. Verse 14 reports that the disciples were joined by certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. And they spent their time constantly devoting themselves to prayer. We pick up the story in Acts chapter 2 beginning at verse 1:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Maybe it is all of the graduations and end of the school year rituals that are making feel nostalgic. Or maybe I can blame it on my FB memories that keep popping up on my timeline, but I have been thinking a lot about transitions this week. In our scriptures this week and last week, the disciples heard their commencement speech and were in transition to what was next. And while scripture tells us they were filled with joy, I suspect there was also some nervousness as they awaited their baptism from the Holy Spirit. I sympathize with that tension.

When I felt the call into ministry, and decided to leave my position as a professor and become a student again, I was nervous. I was especially nervous about the requirements of all PC(USA) ministry candidates to learn Greek and Hebrew. My minister friends assured me I'd be fine and that there would be a lot of support and that some of my best friendships would be forged in the study groups I should most certainly take advantage of. My minister friends were right, I was fine (and I actually really loved my language classes), there was a lot of support, and some of my closest ministry friendships were birthed in that immersive Greek school experience my first summer in seminary.

As I think back on that summer nearly 9 years ago, there are three things that stand out in my memory. The first is how amazing it felt after 6 weeks of intensive study to be able to open my Greek New Testament and read a passage of scripture and get it. I should acknowledge that I wasn't able to read most of the New Testament without the help of a good dictionary or computer software, but there was some passages in the book of Mark (the easiest Greek in the New Testament) that I could read and understand. The light bulb had turned on. And I imagine the disciples felt a similar sensation when the Holy Spirit descended on the place where they had gathered and they could speak in other languages.

The scripture goes on to recount how crowds who gathered for the Pentecost festival, crowds from regions far and wide could hear the message being shared in their own native language, even though the speakers were from Galilee. I can imagine a cartoon drawn of that day, light bulbs turning on over each of the heads as they "got it," as they understood the good news of Jesus' ministry and the good news of salvation. And get it they did. For, in the end of Acts 2 we learn that about 3000 people welcomed the message of the gospel and were baptized. And following their baptisms, these newly minted faithful, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. So while we often think of those Holy Spirit moments as deeply personal, and they are, they are often deeply communal as well. Scripture tells us that the transforming act of the Holy Spirit was to create community – to create a community of believers who worshipped, prayed, ate and studied together. It was then, and is now, all about community.

Now the second memory that stands out for me, was the blessing of learning Greek while living in the South. To better explain what I mean, I am going to read a couple of the verses that I read earlier in a slightly different version of scripture.

Gathering the disciples together, Jesus commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "y'all heard of from me, for John baptized with water, but y'all will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."¹

Yes, friends that is a reading from the Y'all version of the Bible. And yes, there is a Y'all version of the Bible. Little did Martin Luther know that when he encouraged translating the Bible into the vernacular, to the common language of the peoples, that someday there would be a Y'all translation. Now to be fair, this translation was not made to make scripture easier for those in the South to understand. Rather, as Professor of Biblical Studies Mark Hoffman notes, "when reading the Greek New Testament, there are separate forms for the second person singular and plural. In English, "you" can be either singular or plural. How can someone who doesn't know Greek tell the difference? Different parts of the world and of the United States have addressed the matter with various colloquial forms of the plural such as "you all" or "y'all." Wouldn't it be nice to have an English version that could help an English reader be aware of the distinction? To the rescue is the Y'all Version! It's a version of the Bible Web App developed by Digital Bible Society."² And as not to leave out other parts of the country with different colloquial expressions, the reader can use "you guys," "youse guys," "yinz," (which would make my Pittsburgh relatives happy), as well as a variety of other regional options.

¹ Acts 1:4-5 from the Y'All version of scripture. <https://www.yallversion.com/>

² <http://bibleandtech.blogspot.com/2019/12/yall-version-online.html>;
<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=E6eodUsAAAAJ&hl=en>

Now on the surface this version may seem a little unnecessary or even silly, but it underscores an important point. As New Testament Professor Greg Carrey relates, “American Protestants often interpret Jesus’ words as addressed to us as individuals. That is a mistake. Much of the language in the farewell discourse is addressed in the second person plural. You is y’all. When Jesus tells the disciples they will know the Spirit because the Spirit abides with them and lives in them, he is speaking to them collectively. The Spirit constitutes and empowers us not alone but in community.” Are you seeing a theme emerge here... It was then, and is now, all about community.

The third memory of my immersive Greek school experience centers around communion, or really about the bread. Greek class started at 8:30 in the morning and took a break for Chapel services at 10 am. We then came back for another 90 minutes of small groups and lectures. I remember one Friday early in the summer we were struggling through a very tough lesson. Frustration was in my instructor’s voice – a rarity, for he was a gentle man. Frustration was in my classmates’ voices – not so much a rarity. I remember praying that I would not be called on because I was hopelessly lost.

The room was tense. We were waiting...waiting for the class to be over. Waiting for the breathing space of a weekend. It was a pivot moment, a liminal space, an unknown territory for a professor early in his career and unknown territory for a class of students unsure of what their future held. And suddenly from the back of the class there came a sound like the rustling of a wind, and it filled the entire classroom. I looked back and instead of seeing tongues of fire, I saw a classmate open a bag and pull out the remainder of the communion bread from that morning’s chapel service. And he took a big hunk and ate it. He passed the loaf to women sitting next to him and she took a hunk and passed it on. And on it went until we were all fed. And in that moment of passing the bread, the Spirit transformed tension and fear, frustration and bitter tears; transformed a group of individuals, most of them strangers to each other, into community. It was then, and is now, all about community.

And each subsequent Friday, we would take time in the classroom to share the bread that we had shared earlier that morning in chapel. This rhythm became a powerful metaphor for me – that when we carry through what we do in worship for the remainder of the week, life is transformed. Community is birthed. The Good News is proclaimed, not just in word, but in the actions of our common life. And what a rich common life we share here at PCO.

This morning in our worship we are celebrating the gifts of our common life – the children and youth who have been nurtured by this congregation, the teachers who model God’s love and grace; we heard announcements about the ways we can come together to care for each other as we grieve, as well as our care for our local community and our brothers and sisters in Cuba. We are celebrating our music ministry this morning as we dedicate a new octave of handbells. We will gather around the table and break bread together and drink from the cup of the new covenant. And we will celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit that breathed down on the disciples so many years ago and birthed the church. And we will celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit that breathes down on us and molds and shapes and empowers us as a community. It was then, and is now, all about community. Join me in prayer.