

First Lesson: Acts 2:1-21

Second Lesson: Romans 8:14-17

Psalm 104

Gospel: John 14:8-17, 25-27

**Pentecost
June 5, 2022**

“Great Things Never Came From Comfort Zones” Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz

It was 50 days since Christ's resurrection. It was 40 days since the Jewish Passover. It was 11 days since Christ ascended to God. Now the disciples were left alone. The disciples had a few options of what to do. First, they could've returned to their previous jobs as fishermen. Second, they could've looked back on those three years with nostalgia and tried to relive them. Third, they could've searched for another "Jesus" to lead them.

Instead, what they did was go with a fourth option. That option was what we heard in our first lesson. It began with one hundred and twenty disciples - including eleven apostles, Jesus' mother, Mary, his brothers, and other followers of Jesus - gathered in a second-floor room, wondering how to move forward.

As we heard, suddenly from above 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 and rested on each of them. The Holy Spirit filled them, and they spoke in other languages.

Whether we've heard this story before or listened to it for the first time, this event is considered the day the Christian church was born. However, we should look at this event in a different way. We should see it as the day when the disciples were changed. It was the day they realized they were part of something bigger than themselves.

It was the day they didn't return to their previous lives but were sent to proclaim an unlikely message. That message was that God redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher who was executed for treason and blasphemy. They were sent to share the good news of God's unconditional love and favor. They were sent because of the Holy Spirit, and their lives wouldn't be the same.

We often forget how the story of not only Christ's resurrection and ascension, but also of what the Holy Spirit can, and will do to change our lives. I don't mean how we will be changed in the afterlife, but how we are changed here and now. We sometimes forget that the Holy Spirit, who came on that first Pentecost Sunday, still remains with us today, pushing us to change, move forward, and live by God's grace. We forget that staying the same, returning to normalcy, or living in the past is no longer an option.

For over two thousand years, this mentality has been at the core of our history, tradition, and identity as Christians. If you don't believe me, then perhaps Phyllis Tickle and her book called *The Great Emergence* might change your mind. Tickle claims that every 500 years, the church goes through a revolution or reformation. Most of us are aware in western Christianity of how the Protestant church, and especially the Lutheran church, went through this 500 years ago. Unfortunately, this is where most people stop when it comes to learning about church history.

Five hundred years before that, we would hit the Great Schism at the beginning of the 11th Century. During that era, the church was divided between east and west, and this was when the Western Orthodox Church, or Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church were formed.

But it doesn't end there. Again, five hundred years earlier, around the 6th Century, Christianity became a dominant religion because the Roman Empire had fallen. At that time, church leaders gathered together and decided what it meant to be a Christian. Many of those beliefs are still held today.

I know listening to that short history lesson might put us to sleep. So, you might be wondering why that lesson is important? During these 500-year episodes, the church has what an Anglican Bishop named Mark Dyer calls a "giant rummage sale." It takes a look at its old stuff and decides to sell what it no longer needs. Right now, we, as the Christian church, are at the forefront of this kind of giant sale. We are transitioning into a new 500-year cycle.

During these times of rearrangement and upheaval, the traditional church throws off things restricting its growth. Although that might sound scary, history shows that at least three positive things happen. First, a new, more vital form of Christianity emerges. Second, the organized expression of Christianity, which up until then had been the dominant one, is reconstituted into a more pure and less rigid expression of its former self. Third, every time the overly established Christianity is broken open, the faith spreads dramatically, increasing the range and depth of the church's reach.

This upheaval happens because of the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that came on that first Pentecost. It's why the Holy Spirit has, does, and will come to invade our lives. That's why the Christian faith isn't a static religion. We don't merely listen to some stories and continue throughout our week as if nothing happened.

Instead, as our Scripture lesson echoed from the book of Joel, the Holy Spirit changes us to look toward the future, dream about what could be, and have visions. "In the last day it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

So, when was the last time you had a dream, used your imagination, or had a vision? Unfortunately, many churches have stopped because they're more concerned with survival. Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, the authors of the mega-best-seller *Freakonomics*, wrote that one of the keys to visioning or innovation is to be willing to think like a child and relearn how to question assumptions.

"Who says your congregation can't grow? Why do we assume people in the neighborhood won't come to our church? Where did we get the idea, we have nothing to offer our community? These and too many other things 'everyone knows' need to be questioned. By active dreaming, we invite the Spirit to help us see the possibilities we hadn't seen before."

In other words, it's seen as childish to hope for the future. Some of us believe that since we will be dead in a few years, why should we dream. But I tell you this, the church, being a disciple of Jesus Christ, being a Christian is more significant than our individual lives. It's why Luke wrote in Acts that the Holy Spirit doesn't just give visions to young people but also the elderly. It shows us that the Holy Spirit has carried the church before us, and the Holy Spirit will strengthen it after us.

So, the question is, "What type of legacy do we want to leave behind?" Do we want to leave a legacy that helps the next generation to carry on sharing the grace of God found in Jesus Christ? Or one that sets up the next generation for failure? Do we want to be known as a people who helped start a new 500-year cycle? Or a people who were at the end of a 500-year cycle? Do we want to instill wisdom, so others have the tools to make their dreams a reality? Or, do we want to be a people who held onto the past as long as possible?

Dreaming, having visions, and looking towards the future isn't about abandoning the past or tradition. On the contrary, it's being faithful to those who have come before us. Change isn't about removing our identity as children of God, disciples of Jesus, or even as Lutherans. It's about adapting to make the grace of God more accessible to everyone.

I was reminded of that earlier this week. This past Wednesday was the second anniversary of my grandma Pearl's death. Although she was 90 years old, living in a nursing home in Buffalo, New York, and her health was failing; we were surprised that Covid-19 ended her life. Not only that, but my grandmother was my last living grandparent. When I told people she died, the first thing I shared was that she was as much of a German Lutheran woman as they came. She might not have been the most affectionate person in the world, but she was faithful.

I remember when my brother, sister, and I stayed with her, she would take us to worship at her church. I remember how she always had a surprise gift when we visited and made us cookies. I remember how she loved angels. I remember how my brother and I once went to worship with her and how we complained that the Palm Sunday Gospel lesson was longer than the sermon.

I remember my mother's stories about how my grandmother was involved in their little community near Niagara Falls, New York. I remember how my grandmother instilled the importance of the church in my mother's life, thus imparting it to my brother, sister, and me. I remember how my dad, who was formerly Catholic, said, "I thank God I married a good Lutheran woman."

About a year before I moved to Arizona, I also had the opportunity to lead worship and preach at the church where she grew up. That was the place that gave her the foundation to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. But not only was she involved there, but her parents, and my great-grandparents, were also lifelong members. From what I could recall, most of them are buried in their cemetery.

In all of these ways, my grandmother's faith played a significant role in me being in the church and me becoming a pastor. I still remember in her later years how proud she was when I visited her. Whenever we passed by someone at her assisted living facility, she often said, "This is my grandson, David; he's becoming a Lutheran pastor." She was like a peacock spreading her wings. She attended my concerts, a sporting event or two, and picked me up from school when my parents couldn't. She was even there at my ordination, which was the last major event she could attend.

Because of my grandmother, she paved the way for me. She helped me see where I came from, but more importantly, who I am as a person, a pastor, and above all, a child of God. However, if you were to put us side by side, you wouldn't think we were both Lutheran. We acted, worshipped, prayed, and viewed the world differently. But underneath it all, we were grace-filled children of God.

If we are to honor the past, whether it's a parent, grandparent, or anyone else, we should allow the Holy Spirit to move us forward. The Holy Spirit is trying to set us free from the oppressive "we've always done it that way" to share God's grace, hope, and acceptance in a way that people can hear. That's why we should embrace change first-hand in today's age. Whether embracing new expressions of Christianity, becoming more diverse or addressing social issues, the Holy Spirit is moving us to be a church that cares for this suffering world.

So, on this Pentecost Sunday, embrace the change. Embrace how the Holy Spirit is empowering us to stand up for those who are the least lost and vulnerable. Embrace how the Holy Spirit is strengthening us to end racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination that oppress people. Embrace how American Lutheran Church will evolve. Embrace it because what's coming next are our dreams becoming a reality.

- Amen