

“Creation and Communication”

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Acts 2:1-12

Week one of five: Creative Work of the Spirit

READ Acts 2:1-12

The Spirit of God was at loose in the world. People were hearing the gospel message shared in fresh ways that they could understand. This was strange and new and the people were wondering: What does this mean?

Have you ever been in a place where you didn't speak the native language?

I remember going on a mission trip to Haiti back in 1984 with my youth group from church. I was one of 15-20 high school students on the trip. We were there to plant trees and to learn about international mission work. None of us had been to Haiti before, and none of us had been on an international mission trip. Most of us had never been out of the country. In addition to that, we heard that only some Haitians spoke English, but many

would only speak a creole language, which was based on French with some other dialects mixed in. This was all strange and new for us.

We arrived by plane to the capital city of Port-au-Prince and then took a very long bus ride across the country to Cap Haitian, arriving at a seminary in the tropical forest where we stayed. I'll never forget our first meal of some kind of spicy soup with meatballs. We were all guessing the animal source of those meatballs. Have any of you had that kind of experience? You wonder what the food is, but you are so hungry you go ahead and eat it anyway. Again, this was strange and new for all of us.

After getting acclimated for a day or two, a bunch of us found a field nearby where there were some Haitian boys playing. We could not talk with them because of the language barrier, but ... they were kicking around a soccer ball. Somehow we communicated enough with hand gestures to sort out teams to play a game of soccer. At one end of this field were two sticks stuck in the ground about 2.5 feet apart, and at the other end of the field were two more sticks in the ground about the same distance apart. These were our goals.

All of the Haitian kids were playing without shoes and running circles around us. Obviously, they had grown up using their feet in ways that none of us had. It was probably the most bizarre and memorable sports game I have ever played.

Wally, from our youth group, was the only American to score a goal, but that didn't matter. We all left with smiles on our faces and with strangely uplifted hearts after playing with these kids. Even though we could not communicate with words, our common language had been the sport of soccer and that connected us. We felt a remarkable relationship with them that transcended our spoken languages, our different cultures, customs, religion and race. Somehow, we were one on that level playing field.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit opened the way for people from all variety of places, who spoke all variety of languages to hear the good news of God's love and salvation. They were able to hear in such a way that they compelled to respond and join the family of believers. From this story and the book of Acts, we get the picture that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prophesy.

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit breathes into, or lights a flame inside the disciples to speak boldly as witnesses to Christ.

The very same Spirit who inspired and empowered the prophets (Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, etc.) was now doing the same for Jesus' disciples.

Last week we talked about one of the functions of a prophet being to speak truth to the powers that be of government and society. That was also what Peter and Paul and the early disciples were doing.

The early disciples were not referred to as prophets, but the same language that was used to describe the prophets was also used to describe these early disciples in Acts: they were "filled with the Spirit," spoke with boldness, and proclaimed the word from God.

If we step back to see the bigger picture, there is continuity of God's work throughout history: from the prophets of old, to Jesus, to the disciples and then the Church, which includes us. The Holy Spirit is working through the whole story.

I am very encouraged by what comes later in chapter two of Acts...

Acts 2:38-39

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."*

It is inspiring to know that God is concerned about all people, even from far away, who have not yet heard the good news of God's love.

I am reminded of what Phyllis Tickle wrote and talked about nearly ten years ago in her seminal work *The Great Emergence*. She wrote about a 500-year cycle through history during which the Church has a rummage sale.

When you have a rummage sale you get rid of those things that are no longer useful — to create space for new things that are important today and for the future.

She describes how a number of things happen during each of those 500-year cycles in the Church.

- The dominant form of faith prior to the cycle doesn't go away, but does take a lesser place in the world.

- There lingers an uncertainty about what the future will look like because it seems everything that was familiar is thrown up in the air to be reconsidered.

- Authority for faith and life is called into question and for many it seems difficult to know what to hold onto.

- There are cultural, theological, and social dimensions to these rummage sales that have many people distressed as so much is in flux.

- However, there is always a re-patterning, a re-fashioning, a re-organizing of how the message of faith is communicated.

- As a result, whole new populations of people are exposed to the gospel who never would have found a home there otherwise.

You could say that each 500-year cycle is like another Pentecost.

The Spirit is moving and people are hearing the good news in their own language of culture and context and have an opportunity to respond

to God's call on their lives and join in what God is doing.

It is a time of optimism and expansion!

Tickle explains that these cycles can be traced back prior to Jesus in history, but if we take it back to Jesus we can see the pattern. The Jesus event, also called the "Great Transformation" birthed the Church and through Paul, and others, the Church expanded to include those outside the Jewish faith.

500 years later, we had the Fall of the Roman Empire and a division between Western Christianity and Oriental Christianity and Eastern Christianity. This happened around the Council of Chalcedon. This, among other things, created a birth of monasticism which helped to preserve the faith through centuries of later turmoil.

Then, after the turn of the millennia, around 1050 was the Great Schism, or split between Roman Catholicism and Greek or Orthodox Christianity. Begun as a debate over strongly held beliefs about communion and what God's native language was, this split pushed divergent groups in opposite directions and into uncharted territory for church growth.

Of course we have the Great Reformation then 500 years later, when many figures including Martin Luther broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. This birthed the many protestant denominations including missionary efforts throughout the world where new people found faith.

My friends, we are now in the middle of another 500-year cycle. Some are calling it the "Great Emergence" to describe what is rising up from the underbelly of unrest in Protestant and even Catholic faith structures.

Emergent Christianity is much bigger, broader, deeper than the millennials and contemporary worship — let's be clear about that. We don't exactly know what it will eventually look like because we are now in the midst of it. But we have a sense of the trajectory.

This new expression of faith is one that is more interconnected and less concerned with categories. You could say it is post modern, post denominational, post labels.

In this emerging form of faith people are embraced first as human beings and not excluded based on a set of criteria.

So, in the emerging church people are willing to embrace others who have been hurt by or excluded from faith communities in the past or who have not had a faith community. There is space to embrace the doubter.

It leverages technology and isn't solely tied to physical structures, but is very interested in a broader sense of community.

The idea of ancient-future faith is something we will be hearing more about. Within this shift there are people interested in resurrecting and refashioning aspects of deep monastic spirituality as they tap into ancient mystery and passionate forms of faith from the first few centuries of Christianity.

People are also developing new approaches to study theology and understand God from a creatively playful perspective that often leads to deeper wisdom.

This is all happening on the edges of Christianity right now, however, if history is an indication, it will become more and more prominent until some form of it becomes dominant. And again, the forms of Christianity that have survived for 2000 years will also continue alongside these new expressions.

You have watched as this congregation has shrunk over the past decade and more and it has had you rightly concerned.

This is a trend much bigger than Birmingham. It speaks to the diminishing of what used to hold dominance within Christianity. At the same time what is emerging is not yet fully realized. So, we are in a transition time.

What does this mean for us here today?

If we listen to these edges of Christianity we will hear the prophetic voice of God that we need to heed. It is becoming to us to communicate in fresh ways according to the Spirit.

Remember, the Holy Spirit has always been at the core of each 500-year cycle and leads the continual rebirth of the Church. This is the Spirit we follow today.

As we keep our eyes and hearts tuned to the Spirit, God will lead us through this time of transition and help us to direct our attention and energy toward the new thing God is doing here.

Consider that this season is a new Pentecost and God is teaching us a

new language to communicate with those who are not now connected with God's community.

May our lives be transformed by the Spirit who teaches and stretches and renews us.

What is their language? How do we learn it?

* This requires creativity from us.

* It requires us to be open to learn.

* It requires that we create and offer music and liturgy that will usher new people into the presence of God.

* It will require us to communicate in "so what?" messages that will connect with people who don't understand anything about the Church.

* It will require that we create language that is clear and accessible for teenagers and children as well as millennials and families.

* This requires that we risk being uncomfortable.

I am convinced that God's Spirit will help us to learn a new language for a new people.

May our hearts be attuned and open to the Spirit on this journey.