

Pentecost Sunday – May 19, 2024
Acts 2:1-21 [22-40]

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday morning, Helen and I went to the farmer's market in Urbana, bought a bunch of plants for our garden, came home, got the soaker hoses placed in our two garden beds, and got all the plants planted, mulched, and watered. I think we're probably a little behind those of you who are real gardeners. My sister in St. Louis is one of those real gardeners, and she has already harvested some of her early crops of radishes and a few other things I don't remember. We can't seem to manage to get in those early crops. But we got in some tomatoes, peppers, two kinds of basil, cucumber, and zucchini. And now we wait. And water. And weed, but that should be minimal with the mulch, and make sure the tomato plants get attached to their cages and the cucumbers to their trellis. And maybe do a little pruning here and there. And in a couple of months, at the end of July or the beginning of August we should start seeing the fruit of our planting.

It occurred to me in the midst of our garden work yesterday that there is a kind of connection to what Pentecost was all about. It's not an obvious connection, because we have forgotten that Pentecost was a Jewish festival long before it was a Christian one. And originally it was a harvest festival, kind of like Thanksgiving, as the introductory note to the first reading says. It was a time for giving thanks for the first harvest of wheat, planted sometime before the Passover observance, which began 50 days earlier. Jesus used a lot of agricultural imagery in his parables and teaching. Think the parable of the sower. Think the parable of the fig tree that didn't bear fruit. Think the vine and the branches that we heard two weeks ago. In all of those and others besides, the purpose and goal is the harvest, food that is necessary for life.

In the reading for Ascension that we heard a week ago Thursday, as Jesus is about to leave his disciples to return to the Father, they want to know, "now what?" They didn't know he was leaving. They were hoping that he was getting ready to restore the Kingdom of Israel, to make Israel great again. But Jesus says, "no, I'm going. Your job now is to wait. So, wait. And in God's good time you will receive power from the Spirit to be my witnesses." And so they waited. And then on the day of the harvest festival, it happened. It was time. The fruit of their witness was ready. There was wind, there were tongues of fire, and they spoke, in all the languages of the people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the eastern Mediterranean for this festival.

But what did they say? We didn't get to hear that in our reading today. We only got that the message the disciples were speaking in those different languages was about God's deeds of power, and then we heard the beginning of Peter's speech, which was really only the introduction, the set-up. I get why the lectionary folks didn't give us the whole speech, because it goes on for another 20 verses. But when we stop where we do with this reading, we leave the impression that the point of it all was this miraculous sudden ability of the disciples to speak other languages, and those tongues of flame that rested upon them – which apparently no one else saw, or they wouldn't have thought that they were drunk. In other words, we can get caught up in the special effects and miss the message. But the message is where the meaning lies, and it has four main points: First, this is a fulfillment of prophecy. This is something, in other words, that God said would happen through the prophet Joel, and it is something new and different.

And here's a difference I want to point out: "your daughters shall prophesy," said Joel. Daughters? Females? Prophesying, speaking for God? That is radical. So radical that it will turn out to be one of those things that the early church just couldn't bear. "I still have many things to say to you," Jesus tells the disciples in our Gospel reading, "but you cannot bear them now." Women in leadership roles and speaking for God was one of those things that they just couldn't bear, and that we are still struggling with two thousand years later. So, even though the very earliest church seems to have had women prominent in its leadership – Paul sends his greetings to them in his letters, the earliest writings of the New Testament – and even though Mary Magdalene was lifted up early on as one of the most important of Jesus's disciples, all of that was quickly forgotten, ignored or explained away – maybe even suppressed – and fairly quickly the traditional cultural norms were reimposed on the church. But here on the first Christian Pentecost, that radical new reality was being proclaimed. God was doing a new thing that had been planned ahead of time. (Maybe like getting fruit from a garden you planted?)

The second point of Jesus' message was this. Jesus was God's agent, speaking for God, bringing God's reign to earth, and you opposed him. In fact you killed him. Again, as I said a few weeks ago, I wish Peter had included himself among those who aided and abetted Jesus' crucifixion by his three-fold denial, but he didn't. But the fact that we, all of us, oppose God and God's good intentions for us and for the world is nothing new. It has been our story from the very beginning, that reality we name with that churchy word sin.

Third, our opposition and enmity cannot and will not stop God's efforts on our behalf. Killing Jesus doesn't do what we think it will do. It doesn't silence the message. It doesn't end God's project. God has raised Jesus from the dead, and now he rules at God's right hand as Messiah and Lord. But it will be a new and different way of ruling.

There is a fourth point to Peter's message, but he waits until his audience is ready before he delivers it. He lets those first three points sink in and do their work. And they do. Those listening are "cut to the heart" and ask the disciples, "what should we do?" So, Peter answers, repent and be baptized into the forgiveness of sin, into the healing waters that will cure you of your opposition to God.

So here it is again, in a nutshell, the message that the disciples were proclaiming in all those different languages by the power of the Holy Spirit: 1. God is doing a new and better thing for the sake of the world, 2. We are opposed to God's new thing and work against it. 3. Our opposition will not impede or change God, and 4. God will change us. God will not force that change upon us, but God is persistent, and means to rule us through the sacrificial love of Jesus made manifest in his death and resurrection, so that in the Spirit's power our hearts might be captured and our wills bent in the direction of life that really is life, maybe like directing a cucumber plant to a trellis or a tomato plant to its cage.

And what was the result? The garden grew. Three thousand people were added, planted in the ground of God's promise and watered in the waters of baptism. And then, get this: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Does that sound familiar? It's what we are doing right now, right here in the presence of Jesus as we gather in his name around word and sacrament. Those new folks, together with the old ones, were tended and nurtured in the faith, until they began in turn to bear fruit.

God is still gardening, dear people of God, dear plants in God's garden. God is still gardening, still grounding us in faith, still watering us in baptism, still feeding us with God's very self, and still breathing upon us the life-giving Spirit, so that we might bear fruit for God's unfinished project of life for the world. Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)