

A WORD RIGHTLY SPOKEN  
Acts 2:1-21

An amazing thing happened on Pentecost in downtown Jerusalem. A word was spoken and the church was born. So very much like the beginning of creation. In that primordial moment God spoke and the universe was spun into existence: "Let there be light and there was light." At Pentecost an uneducated but fiery fisherman named Peter speaks like he has never spoken before. And the church was formed, born from the Word. Peter spoke convincingly about Jesus of Nazareth, the rejected one now risen from the dead.

Something happens within Peter, something marvelous and mysterious. A new and powerful Spirit wells up within him and he speaks with power-words that cut deeply into the hearts of his convicted hearers. Luke tells us that as a result of this inaugural sermon in the church's life some three thousand people were baptized. Three thousand! The Word was spoken and the Body of Christ was formed. Amazing!

The way Luke tells the story, what happened at Pentecost fulfilled a hope within Israel. The prophet Joel gave voice to that hope when he wrote, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." Not just the select few-the prophets, priests, and kings-but all flesh will receive God's powerful Spirit. And thus people will say and do things they never imagined themselves doing.

Joel envisions a time when young men and women will prophecy, that is, speak the Word to an awaiting world. Young men will see visions and old men shall dream dreams. And Joel even sees a time when slaves will prophecy. Gracious! Slaves will speak the Word. Why? Because the Spirit of God will fall upon all flesh-young and old, men and women, even slaves. People who were voiceless find their voice. People long silenced find words for their feelings and convictions. Joel imagines a world where even the least of these speak and speak with authority. Why? Because the Spirit of the living God wells up within them and becomes a Word.

I think of revolutionary movements throughout the world. They always begin with a Word. Someone has had enough and they get a soapbox or a printing press or a computer and the words flow from them. Words that had been shut up and suppressed within them, words that needed to be heard.

I think of American patriots who simply had enough of British injustice. And they began to speak and write and protest. The heart of the American experience is found in the willingness of a brave few to stand up and speak out. In places like Iran, Myanmar, and Thailand a brave few still speak and resist injustice. We still need that courage to face the countless issues before us.

This past week I have found myself angered by many things in our national life. But right now I am very upset like many Americans about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. I worked in the oil fields of southern Louisiana during my college days and I got to know those good Cajun folks living in the swamps. These hard working folks rely upon the fishing and oil industries for their livelihoods. Now to see that way of life terribly threatened-well, it just makes me very angry and very sad for our neighbors along the Gulf.

I hope to high heaven that this experience is never again repeated anywhere in our coastal waters-from Alaska to Florida. I hope we will speak up and speak out about the need for safer procedures for off shore drilling. Indeed, I dearly hope we think long and hard before we open up new areas for more drilling. When Sharon and I were in the Florida Keys, we heard nothing but anxiety about opening up the Florida coastline to more drilling. I pray to God that the day never comes when the beautiful coral reef off the Florida Keys is spoiled by run away oil.

So the Word needs to be spoken, words of urgency and passion. Words that speak for the powerless, words that speak the hard truth to the powerful. Words that tell of a risen Christ who makes all things new. Words inspired by the Spirit of Christ welling up within old and young, men and women, even the very least of these our brothers and sisters. After all, Peter was no highly educated elite. He was a simple fisherman who got a fire in his belly and stood up before his people and cried out that a new day was dawning. A day when the Risen Christ would call all people to repentance, to fellowship in his Spirit. When strangers become sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. This is what stirred Peter to speak like he had never spoken before on that astonishing day we call Pentecost, the birthday of the church.

The Scriptures are emphatic about this-a word rightly spoken is a powerful instrument. Words that speak the truth in love, words that demand our attention, words that command our repentance. If you have ever heard a clear and clarion call to change, you know what I am saying. If you have ever heard a poignant summons to give of yourself and move beyond your own shell of indifference, you know what I mean. If you have ever heard a

word of radical grace and forgiveness, undeserved mercy, you know of what I speak.

Sometimes we are the recipients of those words and sometimes we speak those words, words rightly spoken-the right words at the right time for the right person. I believe that Pentecost reminds us every spring that God's Spirit creates opportunities for us to speak just the right word at just the right moment. You remember that Jesus told his disciples not to worry what they would say should they be brought before the authorities. Jesus promised his disciples that the Spirit would give them utterance, the Spirit would speak through them and inspire their words. That promise still holds true!

The Spirit of Christ still takes stumbling, uncertain voices and gives us a clarity and conviction we could have only imagined. Moses was sure he could never be a good leader, because he was not a good speaker. Well, it appears that God's Spirit took an uncertain voice and transformed him into a powerful voice of leadership. It still happens and it needs to happen in every generation. The fearful voice, by the Spirit of God, becomes a confident voice, speaking a clear winning word that changes the world.

This past spring I taught a course on a wonderful character in church history, St. Thomas More. You remember the play and the movie "A Man for All Seasons" about this Sixteenth Century English attorney. More was also a deeply committed Catholic layman and theologian, and a man about whom Erasmus said was "born for friendship." I can't remember reading about a more winsome character in all of church history, even though he bore many of the prejudices of his era. A loving family man, a devoted friend, a deeply spiritual and faithful man, More was truly a man for his time and a man for all seasons.

But More found himself as the right hand man of King Henry VIII at the center of a storm. And Henry was unhappily married to Catherine of Aragon, a woman whose male children sadly all died quite young. So Henry decided to divorce Catherine so he could marry the young and attractive Anne Boleyn to give him a male heir to the throne. This led to Henry's desire to break with the Roman Catholic Church. Well, you know the story well how More resisted Henry's efforts and finally resigned. More was then arrested and taken to the Tower of London where he languished for over a year in jail. Finally More was condemned to death, no doubt because of perjured testimony. Right before he was beheaded, More was given an opportunity to speak. And these were his final words, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first."

The Spirit of Christ gives us words even to our last breath. The Spirit speaks through us, for us, and in us. That is the promise of Pentecost. Thanks be to God. Amen.