

*Outside the Walls**

Acts 2:1-24

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I am glad we are outside today for worship. Now, don't get me wrong—I have been a nervous wreck about this whole thing. What if it rains? What if people can't hear what's going on and are too easily distracted? What if my own daughter gets up and starts running around in the middle of my sermon? What if? You know me and my fear of chaos. But standing here, in front of this amazing Pentecost mural, surrounded by all your faces, I am glad we are out here—outside the walls—surrounded by God's creation, teetering on the edge of worshipful chaos, with no barriers between us and the world.

No barriers. It makes us feel a little vulnerable, doesn't it, worshipping out here. I mean, what if the neighbors hear us? Will we disturb them with our singing or with my preaching? And what if someone we don't know walks over here off the street and just plops down to worship with us. My goodness. We don't have our usual sanctuary walls to help keep us together, to help us center, to serve as the markers between the holy and the profane. Being out here with no barriers between us and our community makes us feel a bit vulnerable, doesn't it?

The disciples had left the place of Jesus' ascension and returned back to their own gathering space there in Jerusalem. All along the way they had run into teeming crowds. People were coming to celebrate the Jewish festival day of Pentecost, or the Feast of the Weeks. This festival day is the Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest season in Israel. It is held exactly seven weeks after Passover. The holiday not only celebrates the first fruits of the harvest, but also commemorates Yahweh's giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the people of Israel.

And so, people were coming into Jerusalem from all kinds of places to get ready for the celebration. They came from Parthia, Rome, Judea—all over the land. Different shades of skin, different languages, different ages—a cacophany of noise and smells and colors filled the streets. It was merry chaos! The disciples had to elbow their way through the crowds, being careful not to step on the small children running wild, in order to make their way back to their locked-up gathering space. But finally, they made it and were let into the room. They all gathered together, safely tucked away, and engaged in prayer and conversation about what they should do next. How should they reach out into the world? What would be the shape of their ministry for the next five years?

The disciples, including women like Mary, were all tucked away, apart from the chaos of the streets, cloistered together so they might safely and systematically discern where God was calling them. They were not disturbing their neighbors. No one from the outside could interrupt their time of prayer and worship. The barriers were all in place, nice and neat, keeping the chaos out and the control in. No need to be vulnerable on that day.

* This sermon was preached in the context of an outdoor worship service on Pentecost Sunday.

And then, *intrusion!* God's rowdy and tumultuous Spirit broke down the doors. Now God could have simply slipped in, being respectful of their process and their prayers, not wanting to cause too much of a scene. But that is not what God was in the mood for that day. God's Spirit blew in, swept in, and tore through the group, creating not just a scene, but pure chaos and confusion! The Spirit completely unsettled their planning. And, much to their surprise, and later, to their delight, all of those in the room began speaking in different languages. They simply could not help themselves. God's Spirit caused them to burst forth into unfamiliar languages to proclaim all the amazing things God had done in Jesus Christ.

They were making such a racket that people on the outside began to wonder what was going on. The outsiders started to push through the doors and lean into the windows, captured by what they heard and curious to know what was behind it. And those outsiders were astounded and amazed. For the Elamites looked around the corner expecting to see other Elamites. The Parthians expected to find Parthians. The Libyans thought they would see another group of Libyans. But instead, when the outsiders burst into the gathering, they found a bunch of Galilean Jewish Christians—people who looked like they were more comfortable on a fishing boat than in the marketplace.¹ But even in their shock, the outsiders were transfixed, first by curiosity, then skepticism. They must be drunk, a few decided. Too much wine is the only thing that could explain this kind of openness to us.

I wonder what the disciples felt as they watched all those barriers tumble down around them. As those outsiders filled the room trying to get a taste of the gospel, did the disciples feel vulnerable? Did they wonder how they would be church in the midst of such Spirit-caused chaos? Did they get nervous as they contemplated that if other people came into their group, they might be changed with and by them? Perhaps Bartholomew turned to Simon and said, "Now what do we do? This sure seems awfully risky."

And then, smack dab in the middle of the chaos, Peter, that wonderful mess of a disciple, stood up and began to preach. "We are not drunk," he proclaimed, "Don't you remember the words of the prophet Joel? God promised that in God's own time, all people, young and old, men and women, slave and free, would receive the Spirit, dream dreams, see visions of God at work, and be drawn together in God's gracious embrace of salvation. That time has come. In Jesus Christ, the barriers are broken down. In Jesus Christ, the chaos of community erupts. In Jesus Christ, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one."

And with his words, worshipful chaos erupted in that room. Parthians began embracing Judeans. Elamites shared their lunch with Libyans. And three thousand strangers were baptized into family. Perhaps in the middle of it all, Mary turned to James and said, "Now what do we do? This sure seems awfully wonderful!" That small group of locked-up disciples became a Pentecost church without walls.

That is why I think it is both wonderful and terrifying that we are out here, outside of the literal walls, in worship on this Pentecost Sunday. Because maybe this experience of literal openness will help deepen our discipleship and our conviction to keep moving out into the world, to take the grace that we inhale with one another and exhale it in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Perhaps our literal openness on this day will once again remind us of the reality that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to God's own self.

And then, maybe with that reminder, we might be willing to take risks of discipleship—risks like being willing to counter so much of the negative rhetoric that is sweeping through our town these days around the issues of race and immigration and language. Or risks like saying unequivocally what our church’s constitution claims, “that people of good faith may differ,”² when it comes to social issues and Scriptural interpretation, actively resisting the culture’s pressure to demonize theological diversity.

For our text shows us that a Pentecost church is one that is constantly reaching beyond the things that divide us. A Pentecost church is one that is willing to take risks and engage people who may look or sound different or act differently from the usual person sitting next to us in the pew. A Pentecost church is one that does not expect that unity in Christ must equal uniformity, or diversity must bring division.

On the contrary, a Pentecost church manages to hold enough trust in God’s wild Spirit to believe that God is at work in the unfamiliar, in the chaos, outside the boundaries we impose, bringing new life and new hope to a world that sorely needs it. A Pentecost church believes God knows how to be God and rejoices that we get to be God’s partner in spreading the word of grace and embrace and reconciliation that we know in Jesus Christ into all the world.

And so as we gather here outside the walls this day, may our prayer indeed be “come, Holy Spirit, come.” And may we be open to God’s tumultuous intrusion into our lives.

Notes

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” *Home By Another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 144.
2. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).