

Circle of Mercy Sermon  
Acts 2:1-13  
06/04/17

*Bewildering Blessings*  
by Nancy Hastings Sehested

Bewildering. It's bewildering times. It's hard to name all the ways our hearts have been pulled this week. Bewilderment is a common occurrence. It started so long ago. It's in our soul's code. It's central to our story today, a story too good *not* to be true. Pentecost.

In the book of Acts the wild adventures of a people who came to be known as "church" were chronicled. The letter was written to Theophilus, a name that means "Lover of God." So all of you Theophilus-es, you Lovers of God, may you hear this far-away story as very near.

It started with women and men who were followers of Jesus stuck in the waiting room. Jesus was gone but before he left, he gave his followers one simple instruction. Wait. Not get busy, but wait. Who tells people to wait when there's so much to be done? Wait, said Jesus. Wait for the Spirit. It's coming. They waited in fear. The authorities, both religious and political, could still find them, imprison them or kill them, just like they'd done to Jesus.

Since it was the Jewish high and holy day of Pentecost, they waited together in Jerusalem. It was Shavuot, not only a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest, but a celebration of the giving of the law to all the people at Mt. Sinai. All the people came to celebrate from all over the region. It was a parade of nations.

The disciples were gathered in one place...silent and silenced by their fear. Did they wait in regret for the missed opportunities with Jesus? Did they wonder how they could've been more faithful to him? Did they question their interactions with Judas, wondering if they could have helped guide him from his tragic choices? Did they feel that their movement had failed? Our spirits can be dominated by things we have done, as well as things that have been done to us. Waiting. It can create some inner turmoil.

Suddenly the rush of a violent wind blew into the place they were sitting. It was as if a brush fire had ignited them. It seemed like their hair was standing on end as if on fire. Their tongues were set loose. Everybody talked. As the winds blew, the words flew.

Then somehow they found themselves with the throngs of people. Everybody spoke up and spoke out. The Spirit offered simultaneous translation. Everybody heard each other, each in their own native language. The walls of division gave way to understanding. No one could've seen it coming. No one could've planned it.

They were bewildered...or be-*wild*-ered. They heard each other speaking in their own language, but they heard more.

We can speak each other's language and not understand each other. What did they hear? Perhaps they heard they were not alone in their struggles, and it gave them hope. It was a bewildering blessing.

They still looked different, sounded different, dressed different...but everything was different. Their differences did not hinder them from opening their hearts to hearing each other.

What'd they hear? Stories. Stories about what God was doing in their lives. "speaking of God's deeds of power." They jabbered away about the sightings of God in Mesopotamia, and Egypt, and Pamphylia, and parts of Libya and even in Rome! Rome? Could anything good come out of the capital of the Roman Empire? A place where the Emperor had a heart that was two sizes too small? But the Spirit blows where it wills, even in Rome.

People were busting to tell the news from their part of the world. We can only imagine their stories. Perhaps that's where we always begin in hearing each other through the chasms of our cultural and religious and political divides. We tell each other our stories.

They were swept together by a Spirit of goodwill for one another. The suffering of one people was the suffering of all people. The joy of one people was the joy of them all. Their local experiences engendered global consequences. A spirit of hope seized the crowd. They were smiling and laughing and cheering. They felt a oneness, a not-aloneness, a unity like never before. They didn't know how to explain it. So the storyteller said, they were "amazed and astonished."

But not everyone caught it. It's hard to believe but some had their arms crossed and ears stopped up. Nay-sayers were in the crowd who said, "Oh, this is nothing more than the giddiness of wine drinkers at a festival. It's nothing. It's covfefe."

But it was something! It was an uprising of the people. A people huddled in fear in a small room busted out, and joined with strangers who were longing for connection, community, and hope. The pulse of a people was heard and heralded. They found their voice. A community of resistance was born. It was the resurrection of the body, a communal resurrection of new life.

It was so wild, so new, so bold...so astonishing that they didn't have words to describe it. But Peter, a man who never had a loss for words, sure tried. He reached back to the prophet Joel to explain it.

"Lovers of God, this story has been going on a long time. This is an unfolding story. And this is our time. This is kairos time. This is God time. God said that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, with sons and daughters proclaiming it, and young ones seeing visions, and old ones dreaming dreams. People who've been enslaved, people who've been pushed aside, are rising up front and center.

God's Spirit is being poured out on all. Just look at us! We're rising up together. It's the breakthrough of God, in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth bore witness to the mighty deeds of God with power and wonders that he did among us. He was martyred. But he rose again. And now the same Spirit that raised him is rising up in us. We're celebrating the giving of the Law today allright. The law of love for neighbor as ourselves. The law for the common good. The law of the politics of God. The law that is written on our hearts. We can dream again. We're rising up on the wings of God's spirit!"

"Awe came upon everyone." (Acts 2:43) A community was birthed that day. A liberated and liberating community. They were delivered of their weights of the past, and freed of fear for their future. It made them bold and generous. New practices popped up. They re-imagined life together.

They shared what they had with each other. They broke bread together. They prayed together. It was their practice for keeping the vision clear, and keeping their spirits alive, and building trust with each other and an untamable spirit.

A revolutionary spirit swept through the people. They gave themselves to healing, to reconciling work...and they got into heaps of trouble with religious and civil authorities. They defied the empire's oppressive ways. While the rulers built walls, they built bridges. We call this new convergence, this Pentecostal uprising of bridge-builders for peace and justice...we call it the birthday of the church.

The Spirit is often depicted as a beautiful white dove of peace. But the 5<sup>th</sup> century Celtic church imagined the Spirit as a wild goose on the loose. When you read the rest of the story, you realize it was a wild goose chase. The community of resistance went public, and took to the streets.

Peter and John were sent out as the first reconciliation team. They went to the temple to pray and there they invited a man who was lame to stand up and join them. "Silver and gold have we none, but what we have we give you". We give you Christ's love that will not let you go. Rise up with us and come along." He did. And the religious nay-sayers were right there to try to push everyone back down again.

But their obstacles gave Peter another opportunity to preach. He held a press conference at Solomon's Portico.

Peter said something like this, "Friends, this has been God's plan all along that we recognize we are one family. 'I know you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers', (Acts 3:17) but now we know the truth. "Times of refreshment are offered to you. God's been encouraging a "universal restoration" (Acts 3:21) plan for the people since the beginning of time. Forget the Horatio Alger story of pulling yourself up all by yourself. That's not possible. We're in the struggle together, and we're in the blessing together."

The religious reactionaries were "much annoyed" by this speech. They seem to be around wherever we go. Doesn't it still drive us to despair of how much religious folk have been

the source of meanness? It was done in the name of God with the early church, and it's still being done.

Did you hear about the young gay man in Rutherfordton who was beaten and shamed by a religious group? Religious extremists are still with us...killing and stabbing and hating in the name of God.

Peter and John received threats. "We're warning you. Don't speak about Jesus and this God movement anymore." But they did. There was no stopping this Pentecostal movement of the Spirit. They were arrested. They were released. It went on like that. Catch and release. Catch and release. Their non-violent movement of resistance was met with violence again and again.

Meanwhile the newly formed reconciliation movement was doing all they could to live into their vision within their own membership. The tensions outside their movement were intense, and the conflicts inside their movement were disheartening. They never imagined so much trouble after such an exciting start.

There was a couple who held back some of their assets from the common purse. And the community feared their experiment in radical sharing was faltering. Then racial tensions among them erupted in the daily distribution of food. The Hellenist widows were being neglected. They had to confront their own prejudices. They had to look at their neglect of the poorest people among them. They had to face their own gender bias. They had to face their own patterns of privilege. They decided not to rely on good intentions, but instead ordained seven deacons to keep on eye out for justice being served in their community.

Then one of those deacons, Stephen, was stoned to death by religious zealots. They never imagined stirring up so much trouble. But the wild goose was still loose. The people kept on rising up, their numbers increasing. They were baptizing people into this radical vision of re-arranging the social order.

Saul did what he could to stop them. He persecuted them.

He needed to be stopped from his violent ways. He was.

He had a change of heart. The wild goose didn't know any better than to go into his soul's terrain and stir things around. It took awhile before the disciples could trust him though.

A change of heart happened with a military man too. Cornelius. Just when folks thought they had everybody figured out, they didn't. The transforming power of the Spirit was still at work changing the hearts and minds of people who were thought beyond redemption.

Conflicts about inclusion and exclusion were common.

You'll not be surprised to learn that the community had endless meetings about food and sexuality, race and class, power and authority.

Are only those who eat kosher meals welcome in the community? Some said, “You know those Gentiles. You’ve seen what they eat? We can’t have a potluck with them.”

And then the issues of sexuality. It’s a never-ending story. Were the circumcised and the uncircumcised included together? Race, class, sexuality, creed. It was all wrapped up in the ways power is used and abused. The sacred text was used to justify whichever side of the issue one favored.

People who want us to get back to being a New Testament church should read the story. We’re already there. Squabbles. Divisions. The church has always struggled with the vision. Does God’s Spirit really get poured out on all people? Does all really mean all?

Sometimes we can fall in love with our own moral outrage and forget how to love. It takes time. It takes time for all of us. This is one reason we need circles of mercy. Because we blow it time and again is no reason to blow off the church. Why? Because the Spirit is still blowing us into love and good works.

One of the charges leveled against the early church is that they “were turning the world upside down.” But isn’t that what love does?

Years ago in another church I asked a new member why he’d joined. I thought he’d say the lively music. I hoped he’d say my preaching. Instead he said, “I want to learn how to love. I’ve failed so many times.”

The church was and is for people who want to learn how to love. Maybe we’re all just knocking on the door of the house of mercy longing for a place to call home.

It is a bewildering time. It is a blessed time.

Paola Mendoza, filmmaker and activist, named the work of the Spirit in keeping us rising up:

*After the election I was as devastated as anyone else...And I came to realize through many tears and much frustration that one thing that got me up and got me out and got me moving and got me working, was Love. It was Love for my community. It was the idea that I didn’t have the luxury to stand back and just watch my community be ripped apart and destroyed and have parents stolen from their children as they’re being deported. But the Love for my community was stronger than the heartbreak and the despair and the rage that I felt. You don’t get tired of loving.*

Lovers of God, lovers of this earth and the people in it...we’re not tired of loving. We’re still riding with the winds of hope, and on the wings of love.

Keep coming, Holy Spirit! Keep on coming!

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June 4, 2017