

## **Pentecost B 2018 Sermon**

### ***Acts 2:1-21***

*When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:*

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.  
And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.  
The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.  
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*"

At the very end of the Gospel of Luke, right before the resurrected Jesus ascends into heaven, he tells his disciples, "...stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." <sup>1</sup>

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, which is Luke's *second* book, we see people gathered together in Jerusalem being clothed with this very power from on high – the Holy Spirit.

Now, in both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke uses geography symbolically; and the geographical center of both of Luke's books is Jerusalem. New Testament Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes: "In [Luke's] **Gospel**, the narrative moves *toward* Jerusalem... At the end of [Jesus' ministry in Galilee], the transfiguration account explicitly prepares for the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' death there... Luke has all of Jesus' resurrection appearances take place in the environs of [Jerusalem], and in the last appearance [in Luke's Gospel], Jesus instructs the disciples to 'stay in the city.'

"In Acts," Dr. Johnson continues, "the geographical movement is away from Jerusalem. [Before ascending into heaven, Jesus tells his disciples], 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.'" <sup>2</sup> Indeed, the whole book of Acts is the story of how the earliest followers of Jesus bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

If we take as an illustration atomic energy, we might say that in Luke's **Gospel**, the focus narrows, down, down, down until Jesus arrives at Jerusalem, where he is crucified, is risen from the dead, and tells his disciples to remain in the city. On Pentecost, with the gathering of all the nations of the world in Jerusalem and the coming of the wild energy of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, a critical mass is achieved, and there is then an explosion of the Holy Spirit out from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

We could say, then, that for Luke, Jerusalem is ground zero.

And Jerusalem is **still** ground zero today – but for very *different* reasons than in Luke's writings. In **Luke's** story, Jerusalem was "ground zero" because people had come together from all the nations (and Luke makes a point of listing them at length!), yet they understood each others' languages! And they were then sent out *from* Jerusalem in a "Spirit explosion," if you will, to spread the Holy Spirit to all corners of the world.

But Jerusalem is "ground zero" *today* in the sense that it is the flash point, the focal point for sectarian fighting and *division* between nations. Now, whether or not you believe that moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem was a step forward or a step backward in the decades-long efforts of the United States to broker peace in the Middle East, I think, at least in my own interpretation of the Gospel, that the choice of the person to deliver the "blessing" at the ceremonial opening of the Embassy, Baptist Pastor Robert Jeffress, was unfortunate if our goal in Israel is to bring people of diverse beliefs and cultures **together**, as the Holy Spirit did on Pentecost. Former Republican Presidential candidate Mitt

Romney, who is a Mormon, objected to the choice of Pastor Jeffress, writing, “Robert Jeffress says ‘you can’t be saved by being a Jew,’ and ‘Mormonism is a heresy from the pit of hell.’ He’s said the same about Islam...”<sup>3</sup> [unquote] Jerusalem is ground zero today because of *sectarianism*; it was ground zero on that day of Pentecost because the Holy Spirit helped people gathered from all the nations to understand each other – and then sent them out to spread the Gospel of God’s love to the ends of the earth.

On this Feast of Pentecost, then, we are faced with two stories of Jerusalem as “ground zero.” Whose story do we choose – Luke’s, or Pastor Jeffress’? Can the Holy Spirit move and work through people of good will who seek the truth, no matter **what** their culture, nationality, race, or religion? Does “the wideness of God’s mercy”<sup>4</sup> extend beyond the boundaries of Christianity? In seeking an answer, let’s first look at some evidence in the Bible – which is the authority many evangelicals such as Pastor Jeffress cite in their attempts to justify their view of the *exclusivity* of Christianity.

To begin with, it is important for us to remember that, while the Holy Spirit certainly came upon the disciples with great power on Pentecost, Pentecost is not the *first* time the Holy Spirit appears in the Bible! From the very first chapters of the Bible, in fact, we read that the Holy Spirit was involved in creating the world at the dawn of time, and in breathing life into the nostrils of Adam, the ancestor of **all** humans, *including* Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Christians. We profess every week in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life,” and I presume that means *all* life: animals, plants, and humans of every religion or no religion. The Creed also says that the Holy Spirit “has spoken through the prophets” like Isaiah and Amos in the Old Testament (even though Pastor Jeffress says Jews are going to Hell). The prophet Isaiah tells us that God called Cyrus of Persia, a pagan king, to be God’s “messiah,” God’s anointed one.<sup>5</sup> “...I called you by name,” God tells Cyrus. “I gave you an honored title, though you didn’t know me.”<sup>6</sup> Though Cyrus didn’t know Yahweh, the God of Israel, God nonetheless used him for his divine purposes.

Just a few Sundays ago, in our Epistle reading, we heard John say, “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... for God **is** love.”<sup>7</sup> And again, John writes, “if we love one another, God lives in us...”<sup>8</sup> Now, people of **all** religions *love*; therefore, according to John, they must be born of God and know God, and have God’s Spirit living in them.

Since God **is** love, it follows that when you and I love, we experience the Reality of God. And when people of *other* nations and religions love, **they** experience the Reality of God. They may not put words such as “Father,” or “Jesus,” or “Holy Spirit” to their love-experience, but it is still the same Reality, the same God, that we all experience.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes: “[The] one Holy Spirit has moved through all of us over time—creating the Franciscans and the Second Vatican Council for Catholics, the Baptism in the Spirit for many Protestants, deep mystical movements in **all** faith traditions, and a growing recognition, as St. Thomas Aquinas often wrote, that ‘If something is true, no matter who said it, it is always from the Holy Spirit.’”<sup>9</sup>

Fr. Rohr has traveled all over the world and met holy people of many different traditions. Reflecting on this, he writes: “In time, I could not help but see the many faces of Christ and the [Holy] Spirit in serene Hindus, native peoples in love with the natural world, my socially conscious Jewish friends, profound Buddhist wisdom, Sufi God-lovers, and, of course, in loving Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants of every stripe, often in *spite* of their denomination or theology rather than *because* of it.”<sup>10</sup> [unquote]

My friends, if we read the Gospels, we will see that Jesus befriended and affirmed groups of people who were hated by his own Jewish religion: Samaritans, Roman citizens, pagans, and Syrophoenicians. As a verse in our final hymn today states,

Did Christ not show immense respect  
for those of a less favoured sect,  
enjoying, when the faith shone clear,  
the faithful other people fear?<sup>11</sup>

British theologian Lesslie Newbigin served as a missionary in India for 38 years. Although deeply committed to his Christian faith, Newbigin saw in the people among whom he lived – Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and others – the image and love of God, and the character of Christ. Newbigin wrote: “The Christian confession of Jesus as Lord does not involve any attempt to deny the reality of the work of God in the lives and thoughts and prayers of men and women *outside* the Christian church. On the contrary, it ought to involve an eager expectation *of*, a looking *for*, and a rejoicing *in* the evidence of that work [of God in others]. There is something deeply wrong when Christians imagine that loyalty to Jesus requires them: to belittle the manifest presence of the light in the lives of men and women who do not acknowledge him, to seek out points of weakness, to ferret out hidden sins and deceptions as a means of commending the gospel. If we love the light and walk in the light we will also rejoice in the light *wherever* we find it—even the smallest gleams of it in the surrounding darkness.”<sup>12</sup> [unquote]

But we are slow to learn. According to FBI statistics, incidents of religious hate crimes in the United States rose from 2014 to 2015 by 23 percent. Most of those religiously-motivated hate crimes targeted Jewish people, but attacks on Muslim-Americans rose an eye-popping 67 percent.<sup>13</sup>

My friends, we need today a **new** Pentecost – or at least, a revival of the Spirit of that first Pentecost, when people from nations and cultures around the world came together in Jerusalem, ground zero, and were filled with God’s Holy Spirit,

enabling them to understand one another despite differences in language, culture, and race. And when the in-filling of the Spirit hit a critical mass, it exploded outward, sending people into every corner of the world to be bearers of the divine love and power of the Holy Spirit.

May it happen again in us, today.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> (Luke 24:47, 49)

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 3, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 14-15

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/romney-criticizes-robert-jeffress-ahead-jerusalem-embassy-opening-n873821>

<sup>4</sup> See “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,” Hymnal 1982 #470, words by Frederick William Faber

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 45:1 The Old Testament Hebrew word in this verse which is translated into English as “anointed one” is *māšîaḥ*, “messiah.”

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 45:4

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:7, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:12, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, “75 Years of Life,” Tuesday, March 20, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Rohr, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> John L. Bell and Graham Maule, “Fellow Travellers,” from *Known Unknowns: 100 Contemporary Texts to Common Tunes*, Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications, 2018, p. 58

<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), page 175.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/14/502036699/hate-crimes-rose-in-2015-with-religious-bias-a-growing-motivation-fbi-data-shows>