

Our two Scriptures which we read today are two Scriptures which are traditionally grouped together for Pentecost Sunday which is today. Pentecost originates in the Old Testament. Pentecost comes from a festival which celebrated the Spring Harvest and comes 50 days after the Passover celebration. According to Jewish tradition the law of God was given on this day to God's people. We celebrate Pentecost today 50 days after Easter.

In our first Scripture which was read from Genesis 11, the first book of the Bible, we read about how the people wanted to build a tall tower and make a name for themselves. It seems that the people were getting pretty full of themselves. The people were very proud of themselves and wanted to build this big tower toward heaven.

Here we see where the people want to cross that chasm between God and humanity. But God wants none of that. In the Genesis passage God decides that it is not good for the human race to think that we can become godlike so God confuses their language which causes the people to scatter.

The tower is called Babel which means "confused" and it is where we get the word "babbling" today. So in our first lesson the people speak one language and God breaks this uniformity apart and causes the people to speak multiple languages and inhabit multiple lands and become multiple races.

Our second Scripture today tells the story of Pentecost as described in the New Testament. This is going to be the story that tells us about the Holy Spirit coming to be present among the people. We in the church consider this story the beginning of the church so that Pentecost is the church's birthday celebration.

Read Acts 2:1-21

“Andrew Forsthoefel was 23 years old when he decided to try walking across the Continental United States from his home in Philadelphia all the way to the Pacific Coast. No rides. No smart phone. He carried a backpack containing camping equipment, a camera, a food bag stocked with jerky, tuna fish and PB&J, and a sign hanging off the pack that said, "Walking to listen."

He also carried a voice recorder that he used to collect the stories of those he met along the way, asking them the question, "If you could go back, what would you tell yourself at 23?" The question yielded some remarkable answers.

Andrew admits that along with his spirit of adventure he traveled with an acute sense of vulnerability. At times he said he was "fear-walking." And this fear was heightened by those that he met along the way. Not one person said that they would tell their 23-year-old self to be more cautious or more fearful.

To the contrary, their messages were full of boldness and daring. Nonetheless, Andrew described how when people would take him in they were constantly warning him--telling him to watch out for the others down the road. "Don't trust them," they would say. "They're not like us."

"What I wish," Andrew said thinking back, "is that these people could have experienced what I did and seen that the people that they had warned me about were the very ones who took me in later on, and fed me, and told me *their* stories." Of course most people never had the chance to learn that, from behind their own closed doors."

My friend Jill Duffield began asking herself where God would appear today to carry out Pentecost. Where would God appear where there were a diversity of people gathered and God would bring them together? Jill thought about the DMV or Wal-Mart or a large hospital emergency room or a Friday night football game.

She thought about the places where she spends her time and she began to realize that she could not think of a single place in her life that fit the description of being a place where a diversity of people gathered. Not her church or her kids school or where she works or the grocery store where she shops. Jill began to realize that she pretty much spends her life surrounded by people that are like her.

If we are honest we pretty much all do that. We like to surround ourselves with people that look like us and think like us. We watch certain television channels or listen to certain talk show hosts that reinforce what we think we already know.

But if we are open to God's Holy Spirit then we may find God's Spirit working to break apart these bubbles that we try to place ourselves inside of. I recently read about one person who had one of these types of encounters with the Holy Spirit.

Adele Levine tells the story about what happened at her Dad's funeral recently. When her father found out he had cancer he called a family meeting to communicate to the family his funeral wishes. Her father said at the meeting that he wanted Rabbi Eli to do his funeral service.

Adele Levine says she was surprised to hear that her father knew a rabbi because he was not particularly religious. But her father shared that he knew this rabbi as a stand-up comic and he found him very engaging.

Her father eventually died and so Adele Levine contacted Rabbi Eli in a suburb outside of Washington, DC. She talked to him on the phone but did not find him to be the type of person she would have expected to be a stand-up comic. She described him as stern but kind. The rabbi agreed to do the funeral.

Adele Levine told the rabbi where her father was to be buried which was a non-Jewish cemetery because her mother was not Jewish. Adele was surprised to hear the rabbi say that he could go to that cemetery because it was not a Jewish cemetery. The rabbi agreed to do the funeral at the funeral home instead.

Adele Levine asked her mom what Rabbi Eli looked like. Her mom said that he was tall with red hair. When they arrived at the funeral home they were quite surprised when Rabbi Eli showed up. Instead of being tall with red hair he was short, had black hair, a big beard, and wore clothing that showed that he was an Orthodox Jew.

Rabbi Eli could not shake Adele's hand because Conservative Orthodox Jewish men are not allowed to touch a woman. It was clear that Adele had called the wrong Rabbi Eli!!

She describes the scene at the funeral home this way, "Here we all were. My sister, my Swiss mother with her thick Swiss accent, my agnostic lesbian partner, our baby, our conservative Orthodox rabbi and me. Under different circumstances we would never had been in the same room. But on that day we were all Orthodox Jews."

Others then arrived for the funeral service. Apparently Adele's father had touched a diverse group of people. At the funeral were people from Guatemala, Vietnam, Switzerland, Korea, China, India, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. They were Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and agnostics.

But at that moment, Adele says, the rabbi was the rabbi to all of us. For that brief moment of worship our boundaries were broken down and we were all one.

If we surround ourselves with people that look, act, and think like us we may not be where the Holy Spirit is blowing fresh winds. If we seek out diverse people with diverse opinions we may find the winds of God's Holy Spirit blowing fresh around us and stirring us to see something differently that we had before.

If we intentionally put ourselves around people from different backgrounds and economic levels than us then we may find God revealing something to us that we could not see otherwise.

Where is God's Spirit blowing you? What barriers is God's Spirit trying to break down in you? AMEN.

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-Duffield, Jill, "What's wrong with the whole earth having one language and the same words?" Presbyterian Outlook email on "Looking in the Lectionary," May 9, 2016

-Sherouse, Alan, "Open Wide the Doors," Day 1, http://day1.org/7240-open_wide_the_doors

-Levine, Adele, "I Accidentally Hired an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi for my Father's Funeral and he was Great," Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/05/10/i-accidentally-asked-an-orthodox-rabbi-to-perform-my-fathers-funeral-it-went-beautifully/>

-Given: May 15, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)