

Year C Pentecost Take Up Space John 14 8 to 17 and Acts 2 1 to 21

Jesus challenges us today to believe. Four times in just three verses, Jesus says to us: believe. And, if we focus on those words, we discover something very important. Believe that the Father and I are one, Jesus says. If you have trouble accepting this fact, then believe it because of the astounding works that you see me do that can only be done by God. Those who do believe that the Father and I are one, will do even greater works than what you have seen me do.

The oneness of God the Father and God the Son is what is being stressed here. Believe that the Father and I are one. Believe this because of the works. Those who believe this will do greater works than I. Why is Jesus stressing this for us? Why is belief in the oneness of God so important?

He is stressing this oneness because of the extraordinary gift he is about to give to his disciples. This is, of course, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “another Advocate”; he is from the Father; he will be with them forever; he will dwell in them; he will remind them of all of Jesus’ teachings. When this is all put together, the disciples are able to realize that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all one. And, with the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, they still have the presence of their beloved teacher with them.

Just as importantly, the Holy Spirit will help them carry on the work that Jesus started with them. He says, the Holy Spirit will come to you because I am leaving you. You will do greater works than I because I am leaving you, he says. Again, the disciples are able to put things together and realize that the “greater works” and the coming presence of the Holy Spirit are connected.

We aren't exactly sure what Jesus means by "greater works". He was giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, turning water into wine...those are pretty great works and the disciples must have thought there was no way they would be able to do anything like that let alone even greater. Most scholars believe that by "greater" Jesus was likely talking about, among other things, the gathering in of the "other sheep" (10:16) that he's mentioned to them earlier. Jesus had already started this gathering work, but they – and future generations of disciples – were going to gather in even greater numbers than he had.

So, when we put together the gift of the Holy Spirit and the even greater works of the disciples that this gift will allow us to accomplish, that brings us to the story we hear in Acts today. Luke shows us the amazing moment when those disciples actually receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, there are many different characteristics of the Holy Spirit, different roles that he fills, and several authors of the New Testament choose to emphasize a particular aspect or role. For John, the Holy Spirit is primarily the Advocate – "the continuing and comforting presence of Jesus with the church, and the source of peace" (Brian Peterson, workingpreacher.org). In Paul's letters, we mainly hear about the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ, makes us the one body of Christ in the world, and who gives each of us particular gifts to be used in our ministry of reconciliation. In Luke's writing, we find the Holy Spirit who is the power of God – the power of the Almighty, Creator of all that is, Breather of life into all things, will not be controlled God. We see this astounding, frightening, uncontrollable power in the rush of a violent wind that fills the house and appears as flames of fire above each disciple. This is the power of God that fills us, pushes us, is always

moving, always active – leading us into the unknown, into newness, into the unexpected, showing to us God’s steadfast, freely given kindness and love in ways and places beyond our imagining.

This amazing, powerful, life-giving, purpose-fulfilling Holy Spirit is given just three sentences in Luke’s long story that we hear. Our focus is almost immediately shifted to what the Holy Spirit then accomplishes in us and in the world. The Spirit immediately forms a gathering of people who now share in the oneness of God. The same Spirit that dwells in me, is the same Spirit that dwells within each of you, is the same Spirit who dwelled within each one of those disciples. We all share in the exact same oneness of God because we all share in the exact same God. In my mind, I see us all joined together, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, like a beautiful, indestructible, glowing, glittering gold rope going through the heart of each one of us, tying us together. We are tied to each other and to God with a bond of love – we can’t see it, but it’s there. We are one. And the Greek word for this gathering who is one, is where we get the word “church”. Both John and Luke make it clear to us that this gathering who is one – the church – is not a human created institution. We, the church, are called into existence by God through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And this gathering who is one – the church – is immediately given a purpose by God.

The disciples, who all spoke Aramaic – and enough Greek to do business – are now speaking all sorts of different languages. Luke names peoples from all over the known world and each of them is hearing the disciples speak in their own language. In Genesis, we find the story of the Tower of Babel in which humans, thinking they could accomplish whatever they wanted without the help of God,

were building a tower to reach God through their own efforts, to have the power and grandeur of God. Well, God put a stop to their efforts by causing them to speak all sorts of different languages. Without being able to understand one another, the resulting disunity caused chaos and conflict and no tower was built. Today, God reverses that chaos and conflict by providing the unifying condition of everyone being able to understand everything that was said. Humans no longer need to try to reach God through their own efforts. God has given himself to us. Each disciple that day became an agent of reconciliation. That is the purpose carried by the gathering who is one – the church – carried throughout all generations. It is our purpose. We are called into existence through the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the unity of God to the whole world. Through our oneness with God and with each other, we are to create more oneness.

The fact that all of the nations of the known world were participating in the unity of understanding one another tells us that God is not rejecting the rest of the world. God intends to reclaim all of his creation, to make it whole again through equipping his disciples to continue his work.

We do this through love. Joined with God who is love, we spread this love. Jesus says those who believe will keep his commandments. The commandment he gives over and over in the Gospel of John is to love. Love one another as he has loved us. The new age of the fulfillment of God's purpose has begun. "In the last days it will be...that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" we hear Peter quoting in Acts. "In the last days" is a change Luke has made in the words of the prophet being quoted. This change tells us that "the last days" are here. They began with the monumental gift of the Holy Spirit that day. It was a God-given turning point in the

history of our salvation, the day the church was brought into existence to carry on the reconciling work of God.

The church, as we know, is not perfect since it is formed of imperfect humans. We are sometimes greedy and corrupt. We are sometimes cranky and unkind. But God has decided that this is the way to accomplish his purpose – to painstakingly love and teach imperfect humans, by dwelling with them, in order that they may love and teach others until God’s love, through these imperfect humans, spreads through the whole world. This is a very slow, very hard process...but necessary. Love cannot be prescribed. Love must be learned. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* writes of the church, the body of Christ. He says, “The body of Christ takes up space on the earth,” — as buildings take up space, also cars, dirt, flowers, rocks, skateboards, and people. He goes on, “A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities ... that is all. But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him.” The body of Christ takes up space on the earth.

We believe in the oneness. We gather others into the oneness. We do this through love. What this looks in our particular place and time depends on the ever-changing needs of others and the environment. The constant we know is that we are ministers of reconciliation, working with God and with each other. We will continuously move forward into the fulness of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, learning how to gather in and to love according to the needs around us, through engaging in prayer and prayerful discussion – always planning, doing, changing, growing, loving, and always taking up more and more space on the earth.