

“Mysterious Ways”
1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 27
Acts 2:1-12
Pentecost Sunday

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Last year for my birthday my wife, Melissa, got us tickets to go see The Blue Man Group. If you have not had the chance to see this rather eccentric performance down town, I encourage you to go, it's a riot! One of the things that make that performance and performances like it so intriguing as an audience member is that there is a time during the show, several in this case, where the spotlight comes off of the stage and begins to roam around in the crowd. Someone is about to be pulled up on stage to become a performer themselves. As that spotlight begins to roam and catches a glimpse of people you can see them look up surprised. They snap their eyes open like a cat woken from a nap by a sudden noise. As an audience member or two are nervously, anxiously pulled up to the front, it is great fun for the rest of us; partly because we weren't chosen but also because we're anxious to see what is going to happen. These are unscripted moments, unrehearsed, unplanned, anything could happen. We begin to pay attention in a little different way because of our nervous energy and excitement.

Perhaps this is a good analogy for us as we reflect on the meaning of Pentecost Sunday and what that event may have been like for those disciples at the beginning of Acts chapter two. Throughout the gospel stories it's been Jesus who was the main actor. Our eyes, throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament, have always been focused on him. What will Jesus do? What will Jesus say? How will Jesus respond to the woman who touches his cloak, or to the father whose daughter has died? What will Jesus do when the gathered crowd needs food and there are only a couple of fish sandwiches to feed them? What will Jesus do with detractors? We've already had one surprise in this performance, this play of sorts – Jesus has been killed by colluding religious authorities, and suddenly been raised to life!

But now in the first chapter of Acts, Jesus ascends into heaven, and it might seem like the play is over. We wait for the final music to begin, for the lights to come on, so we can get up out of our seats, collect our coats, and bags, and shuffle out of the theatre telling each other how wonderful the play was about this man Jesus. “What a surprise ending, that death and resurrection,” we might say. “How inspiring,” we'll mutter to each other. “Makes me think about my life differently,” we might nod. But instead of heading out the door, to return to life as usual, the spotlight begins to roam through the crowd, and suddenly it's not Jesus who is the main actor, but ourselves. We are dragged on stage. What we had imagined to be the end was just an intermission.

This isn't what we signed up for. This isn't what we expected with our paid admission. After all, the story of Jesus is nice when it doesn't demand too much of us. It's wonderful to hear about this great guy who healed the sick, loved the un-loveable, stuck it to the mean people, told great stories, and did some cool miracles. It's inspiring to hear about how he fed thousands and raised the dead. And we love to rehearse his birth in a stable and his resurrection. (Not to mention the great soundtrack of our hymns and songs that accompany this play). However, suddenly we are told that the story isn't just about him after all and that we actually play a pivotal role with lines and everything! SURPRISE! Like those first disciples dragged up onto the stage after Jesus departs, we understandably ask, "What is our role now? What are we supposed to do and say?"

The story of Pentecost from Acts chapter two gives us a few clues as to what God might be up to. As Christine reminded us last year at this time, "While Passover celebrated liberation from slavery, the festival of Pentecost, fifty days later, celebrated the gift of the Ten Commandments and the Torah in the wilderness of Sinai. It was a festival to remember roots, to celebrate the essential things that brought them together in faith, and to give thanks for God's gift of calling them to be his people. And it was a giant homecoming party for many Jewish people far-flung across the Empire. Crowds of devout Jews gathered: Aramaic speaking Jews living in Jerusalem, Greek speaking Jews from Hellenistic cities, Coptic speaking Jews from Egypt, Farsi speaking Jews who lived in Persia." It was like a huge multi-cultural "SummerFest" happening right outside the doors in Jerusalem. That is where we find the disciples that day.

I think it is important to remember that the disciples were not in Jerusalem by accident. When Jesus ascended into heaven in Acts chapter one, he ordered his disciples "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father." That may not seem like a radical request, but the disciples were not from Jerusalem. They were, as the crowd points out, Galileans—rural folk—who were probably not comfortable being in the city. They were not cosmopolitan people. I suspect that they probably wanted to go home after Jesus left the scene. In fact, at the end of John's gospel, we find the disciples already back out in the boat fishing. For them, it seems, Jesus had risen from the dead and the play was over. They seemed quite content just to go back about their business. But Jesus says to them, "don't go home, this isn't over...it's just about to begin, the second half, so I want you to stay here in Jerusalem. Stay here in this place where you are uncomfortable, this place that might be unfamiliar to you." I think the first lesson for them...and for us...from the Pentecost story is that there are times in our call to be faithful followers and proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ, when we are called to be in uncomfortable places; outside of our comfort zones, even in places where we ourselves are strangers or foreigners.

So, having obeyed Jesus command to stay put in Jerusalem, now something really amazing happens. The Holy Spirit comes down and gives the disciples the ability to

speak in the languages of all of those who are gathered outside. Being a former high school teacher, I have considered this event from the perspective of a teacher writing a lesson plan for the day. I imagine that if God were a teacher, the lesson plan would go something like this: Here I have this group of folks sitting in the upper room who are all from one particular tribe, all speak one language and I want them to share the good news with all of these people from different cultures gathered outside who speak all of these different languages. If I were playing God-teacher for the day, I think there would be two ways to accomplish this goal. The first is that the miracle of the Spirit could fall on the ears of those gathered outside so they can hear the one language being spoken each in their own language. Sort of like people sitting at a United Nations meeting with instantaneous translation headphones on. That could have been the miracle and the disciples could have spoken the good news in their one language, their mother tongue. Instead, I think God intentionally chooses to accomplish the goal in a second way. Those disciples who are gathered are the ones who are given the gift to speak in other languages so that all those who are gathered outside are able to hear the good news in their own language. A second lesson, then, from Pentecost is that when we share the good news of Jesus Christ, we might be called to do so in another tongue, in another language. I don't just mean known languages like Spanish or French or Swahili. I mean there might be times we share the gospel with people who simply speak differently than us out of the context of their particular culture, their ethnicity, their generation, or their history. Learning their language may require us to cultivate a deeper relationship with them in order for us to learn how to speak fluently in their vernacular. Only then will we be able to share the good news in a way that they understand it, not simply the way that we have experienced it. Pentecost reminds us that our calling may indeed lead us to speak in a new tongue, in a new place that may be far outside of our comfort zone.

While these lessons are simple to extract from this story, they are hard to live in out in our day to day lives. It might be tempting to think that it isn't for me, that I'm comfortable where I am. I'm not sure I can do what Jesus did, or even what these early disciples did. I don't think that's what I've signed up for. However, I want to remind you that when we are dragged up on stage, it is *our* part to play, not someone else's. We are not called to be Jesus or one of those first disciples. The Spirit empowers us with our own role with our own gifts.

I'm reminded of a story from Paul Farmer, a Harvard trained doctor dedicated to improving the lives of the poor. He has given his life to treating T.B. and AIDS in Haiti and other places where the poor are often forgotten. He has taken on a medical establishment that is sometimes more concerned with cost effectiveness than saving lives. Paul is one of those guys who sleeps only 4 hours a day, traveling from Haiti to the US to Russia to Peru and back to Haiti, using time on the airplane not to read a novel or sleep but to answer email from doctors from around the world, and to

plan the next seminar. One co-worker of his said, “Paul is a model of what should be done. He’s not a model for how it has to be done. Let’s celebrate him. Let’s make sure people are inspired by him.” He added, “[But] if the poor have to wait for a lot of people like Paul to come along before they get good health care, they are in [trouble.]” Farmer agreed with this assessment. Tracey Kidder, who wrote his biography Mountains beyond Mountains, recounts a time when Paul was “stewing over an email from a student who had written that he had believed in Paul’s cause but didn’t think he could do what Paul did. Farmer yelled aloud to the computer screen, “I didn’t say you should do what I do. I just said these things should be done!”

If I can paraphrase Paul Farmer’s words, I would say, “If our neighbors in need, whether in Lake County or in East Africa, have to wait until we all become mini-Messiahs before we will answer God’s call to reach out, then they are in deep trouble.” We don’t have to wait until we are just like Jesus before we begin the work that Jesus gave us to do. The Holy Spirit will give us power to be witnesses to the Kingdom that Jesus initiated, and be witnesses in our own way. We don’t have to do it just like Jesus would have – we have our own gifts and graces if we will only be so humble as to let the Spirit guide us and so bold as to reach out beyond our comfort zones to our neighbors in need.

Oh, and there is one more surprise on this “birthday of the church” Sunday. In our first scripture lesson this morning from First Corinthians chapter twelve, the apostle Paul reminds us that many members make up the one body of Christ. Traditionally, when I’ve heard that text preached or reflected upon, the thinking has been that we might look around, for example at this congregation, and see all of these different members, some new, some here for generations, and we might imagine that each person here makes up a different part of the one body of Christ. Some of you are eyes, some of you are ears or mouths, one of you might be an elbow (no offense, but someone has to be an elbow). We, together make up the body of Christ. Yet, what if we were instead to imagine that this entire congregation gathered here today is but one part of the body of Christ. That the congregation that meets a couple blocks from here might be another essential part of the body of Christ; the congregation meeting out on Waukegan Road might be another essential part and the church downtown this morning as well. What if we were to understand that all of us together as one body, working together side-by-side are needed in order to fulfill the commission that we have been granted. How would that change the way we work and think about being a church together. What if we were to imagine that our whole church in the United States was but one part of the body and that we needed the church in Honduras, in Japan, and in Tanzania in order to be complete; in order to have a complete understanding of who this God is that has created and commissioned us all, in order to have a complete understanding of who we are, as Christ’s body, in order to be in complete fellowship and unity with one another. It’s

easy, sometimes, to think that we might reach out or be aware of or act on behalf of others in other places because it's the right thing to do, or because God has asked us to do it. It's quite another step to imagine that we truly need each other. We need to leave our comfort zones and learn new languages in order to be in true community and in fellowship together—in order to be complete, in order to be the whole body of Christ.

In the words of the hymn from Tanzania that we are about to sing, may our prayer together this morning be, “Gracious Spirit, heed our pleading; fashion us all anew. It's your leading that we're needing; help us to follow you. Come, Holy Spirit, come.”

Amen.