

Sermon for Sunday, June 9, 2019

GOING PUBLIC

Acts 2:1-21

About seven years ago, the social media platform *Facebook* went public. The social network site that was born in a bachelor's dorm room has by now grown to more than a billion users, connecting people around the clock around the globe. The buzz then was electrifying. The business community was ready for the next big thing and had every broker at the edge of their seat at the market's opening bell. Initially traded at \$38 a share, it quickly lost value. Pressured by other internet start-ups like *Instagram*, *Pinterest*, and a host of others that pop up everywhere like mushrooms in the fall, *Facebook* has been playing nothing but defense. In a tech-world in which five years are considered an eternity, it will remain to be seen how *Facebook*, the grand daddy of all social networks, will fare.

In contrast, consider the story of the *Book of Acts* we just read, which we actually read every year at *Pentecost*. There is a lot of buzz going on that day as well. There is a sound like the rush of a violent wind, tongues of fire are licking from heaven at the frightened disciples ducking for cover, and God pours out God's Holy Spirit like it is going out of style. There are bystanders who are bewildered, amazed, and astonished. Everybody is talking at the same time but nobody seems to have trouble following the conversation. This is divine mayhem orchestrated like a Bolshoi ballet performance. This is what it looks like when God takes God's promise to God's people public.

Nobody in the *Pentecost* story has experienced anything like it before and so it is no wonder that people are having difficulty interpreting what is happening. "What does this mean?" the curious and thoughtful among the crowd inquire. "These people are drunk, high on drugs, or something," the frightened sneer. Or, we might say, "the investors" are downright skeptical about the Spirit-filled fireworks they have just witnessed. What is being traded here? Well, whatever it is, God's stock that went public that day is still being traded a few thousand years later, and that's more than anybody will be able to say about any social media stock.

But what *does* this mean? What did the outpouring of God's Spirit mean then at the day of Pentecost and what does it mean for us now? There are numerous interpretations of the *Pentecost* story in the history of the church. That alone already tells us that this significant event has eluded easy explanations. Here are five of the "top ten:"

Number 1. What we are witnessing here is a reversal of the *Babel* story in *Genesis* where God confused the people who spoke a common language by dividing their speech and community because they wanted to be like God. But, in the *Book of Acts*, the people in Jerusalem that day are just as divided as ever and the outpouring of the Spirit does not unify the community. Well, maybe for a moment.

Number 2. Luke describes people speaking in tongues. That interpretation confuses Luke with the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14. Besides, the folks speaking in tongues need an interpreter but whoever speaks at *Pentecost* has no problem being understood without interpretation.

Number 3. *Pentecost* is a covenant renewal story that mirrors the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Again, the interpreters confuse Luke with Paul who talked about that in 2 Corinthians 3. Peter, on the other hand, says nothing about Moses and the law at Sinai in his speech to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem.

Number 4. The giving of God's Spirit is merely a thing that people felt in their hearts and this is a purely personal matter between God and each believer. Problem is that everything that is recorded about this day and event is there for all eyes to see and ears to hear. There is nothing private about God's going public.

And Number 5. This is the all time favorite: *Pentecost* is the birthday of the church. Yet, if we re-read the story with a fine-tooth comb we notice that "church" is not mentioned once in the text. Don't take my word for it. Check it out when you get home. Luke does not speak here about the "founding of God's church" nor about the establishment of a "new Israel."

Sometimes I wonder who makes this stuff up and why it hangs around for so long. But I have not answered the text's and my own question, yet. "What *does* this mean?" Since I am treading on holy ground here, I am not going to answer my own question but I want to make a modest suggestion for our prayerful consideration and faithful pondering. I agree with Luke--this is not a story about the birthday of the church. As far as I am concerned, the church, the body of Christ, was born when the flesh and blood baby Jesus drew his first breath in a barn. Our savior's beginnings were more than humble and I think it may serve the church well to remember that she, too, was not born in pomp and privileged circumstance. I also think that the story with which God went public on *Pentecost* was the story of Christ's resurrection, ascension, and continued presence with us through the Holy Spirit. Until then, Jesus story was a well-kept secret shared by a chosen few. Now, it is out for the whole world to see, and hear, and tell.

What does this mean for us? It means, now we know, too. We know because now everybody knows that Jesus was raised, that he ascended to God the Father and sits in a position of authority and power, that he is with us and for us and lives among us through the power of God's Holy Spirit. This very Spirit is still being poured out upon us today. We are going to witness this in a moment with our very own eyes as we commission our *Mission Interns* to go into our community and incarnate God's love to the folks with whom they will come in contact. We are going to see it with our own eyes when we also commission our *Stephen Ministers* and leaders who are committed to incarnate God's love by listening and walking alongside others in their time of need and distress. Holy Spirit work, Pentecost work by all of them for sure.

So, what does *Pentecost* mean for us? It means that the story in the *Book of Acts* is not just an old, old story. It is also our story. It's an open, not a closed book. Originally, this book is called "The Practice of the Apostles," or maybe more appropriately "What the Apostles did." It is the story of God's people everywhere who tell others in word and, more importantly, in deed, that Christ is raised and gives us new life. The story of God and God's people continues as we continue and as the church continues to proclaim that while our faith may be personal, it is never private but always public. This is why God's stock will never lose any of its value.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, Ph.D.
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO
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