

May 15 – Pentecost

Sermon: What Does This Mean?

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Many of you know the story of Gwen, our granddaughter who was born way too early. She was a micro-preemie and weighed just 1 lb 12 oz at birth. She spent most of the first 100 days of her life at Johns Hopkins hospital in the neo-natal intensive care unit, or “NICU” for short. We were amazed at the skill of the doctors and nurses and all the technology that allowed her to live. Yet the person who impressed me the most was the cleaning lady. She was a tiny older black woman who saw cleaning as a way of being a blessing to the babies and families in that unit. One day as she was cleaning Gwen’s room she got talking to us. She told us how many of the babies are there much of the time alone because parents have to work. When she is in their rooms she sings gospel songs to bless them and to make sure they hear a voice that isn’t a doctor or nurse. She tells every one of them she loves them and so does God as she leaves the room. Baltimore is a multi-faith and multi-cultural city but when people are in crisis and the “NICU” is nothing but crisis, her love and her faith are welcomed by all. Johns Hopkins has come to value her gifts. When there is a code blue and doctors and nurses come running from all over into the room to treat a life threatening crisis she comes a running too. Why? She is to be with the parents, to hold their hands and give them a hug. She is the comfort person when life is falling apart. She told this with great pride. She also said, “I have been offered positions in other parts of the hospital with greater responsibilities but I feel God wants me to be here with the babies. Whenever asked she lets you know that all she does comes from her love of God.

In many ways our encounter with her was a Pentecost moment. She represented God in the midst of the world of science and medicine. Though we will be forever grateful to Johns Hopkins, a NICU unit is a very sterile place. You have to scrub up to even enter. Everything is carefully regulated. At one point they were tracking over 50 different things with Gwen. It took computers to make sure it all worked! All the staff were incredibly kind but it was this cleaning lady that reminded us that God was here.

She gave us a sense of normalcy in a very non-normal setting. Just hearing that she sung to the babies who were alone touched us and still brings a lump to my throat.

Because of her I have asked myself often. How am I representing God to others that I encounter on a day to day basis? How do I see my life as being a blessing to others around me? How do I embrace every moment as an opportunity to share God's love?

Now I am admitting that I am asking you to make quite the mental stretch from this kind and compassionate NICU staff person to Jerusalem and what happened on Pentecost. But let me show you why I think there is a link. We know that as the day of Pentecost begins, sharing the good news, being a blessing to others in Christ's name, was not on the minds of the disciples. In fact the writer of Acts makes very clear the mental attitude of the disciples. They were gathered in an upper room with the doors locked for fear of the authorities. They had experienced the good news. Jesus was risen but they were not ready to share it. They were afraid. Then the Spirit came upon them and they were filled with power and began to proclaim to all the good news of Jesus. All those who heard them asked, "What does this mean?" This gave Peter the opportunity to share for the first time with a large group and it says 3000 were added to the faithful that day. The cleaning lady lived her faith in such a way that it caused you to enter into conversations and she was very clear about what she was doing and why. She was filled with power to share the good news.

She let all know her faith was important to her and that cleaning for the babies at risk was her mission in life. I am sure our family is not the only group to be touched by her witness and faith. The spirit gives us the power not only to believe but to share. Pentecost would have meant nothing beyond the disciples being touched by the Spirit if they had not also shared with others. Its power moved them from fear to faith. It can do the same for us. We need to not only ask ourselves how are we living our faith so that others will want to know more about our lives and the reasons behind our actions, we need to pray for the power to share in such a way that it is meaningful and inviting.

I had a member who worked at the food bank. He was faithfully there every week. He came with a positive attitude, treated everyone with respect and a smile. Often people would comment about how he treated them so nicely and he would always reply, I try to love you as Jesus loves me. Now sometimes the conversation would go no further but other times it led to rich conversations.

Finally, that cleaning lady shared hope as much as the doctors. She would talk about how hard it was to say good bye to the babies. That meant most had left this unit well enough to go home. She provided some encouragement during difficult times. And she would laugh about some of the silliness of the rules with you and celebrate the victories of your little one when everyone else was seeing those things as benchmarks and you saw them as milestone passed to get home. And yes, when tragedy struck, she was there to hug you and let you know you were not alone. We were fortunate that we had someone with Gwen 24/7. I can imagine how hard it was for some families to have to leave their little ones there all day while they went to work. I doubt many of them knew God sent an angel to sing to their babies and let them know they were not alone.

We too are called to live our lives of faith intentionally, to not be afraid. When we think, I could never do that, you are probably right! But when you let the Spirit of God fill you, then you will find that power. We need to realize that one of the reasons God wants us to share our faith is that when we live our faith positively, we share something very important. We share hope. Sometimes we are that little bit of normalcy when life seems crazy and totally out of control. We remind people that God is with them and is in this situation.

I think about times I have been invited to be with families as they are dealing with crisis in their lives or preparing to say their final farewells to a loved one. My being there doesn't make the crisis less intense or the loss any less real, but it often makes it easier to deal with. I remember being at the hospital with a family as they waited for mom to breath her last. She was dying way too young. Her son sat looking at me for the longest time as we were gathered around her bed, talking a bit, sharing stories, and even a laugh or two. Finally, he said to me, "This is part of your job, isn't it?" When he saw my surprised look he said, "I had been thinking about how odd it was that mom was dying.

Seeing you sit there reminds me that people die all the time. It isn't unique, it is just her time." That calmed him down a bit and led to a conversation about her faith and the promises our faith give to us at such a time.

When we intentionally live our faith in places where it is unexpected, like the cleaning lady or Peter standing on a roof top, we might be asked why we are doing such things. Hopefully, like her we can share of our faith and in so doing remind people of God's love. We tell them we are this way because of what God is doing for us. We are called to live our lives with meaning and purpose. To see what we are doing as a God-filled moment and opportunity is a great statement of faith and power. And hopefully it is a life giving blessing to those around us.