

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga

June 5, 2022

Year C, Day of Pentecost

Interpreters

The Rev. Leyla King

Acts 2:1-21

Psalms 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:14-17

John 14:8-17, 25-27

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My seminary required that all students take a class called “Meaning Making.” The class was a small group of peers who met on a weekly basis to talk about our ministries. And, I expected it to be a complete waste of time. I figured, something either has meaning or it doesn’t – I didn’t need to *make* meaning out of my experiences, and I certainly didn’t need any help from anyone else to give my ministry meaning!

But, that class actually turned out to be a fruitful time for me then. Because the truth is, meaning making was – and is – important work, for all of us: in order to fully understand what’s happening to and around us, in order to see and recognize the Spirit’s movement in our lives, we must *interpret* our experiences; we must make meaning out of them. And, often, we need help to do so; we may even need others to interpret our experiences for us entirely. Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in the moment, that it takes someone else, an interpreter, to make meaning out of whatever it is that inspires us with awe or overwhelms us with grief or fills us with hope.

Fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days after his ascension, more than a hundred of his followers are waiting in Jerusalem for some sense of what to do next. Suddenly, Christ’s Spirit comes upon them as they are gathered in one place and they all begin speaking the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – aloud. And people from all nations who have gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost hear that good news in their own languages.

Now, if everyone hears the gospel in their mother tongue, you’d think there’s no need for translators or interpreters in this story from Acts. And that’s true in the linguistic sense. But folks experience this Pentecost, they “all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” *What does this mean?*

The people may have understood the words spoken to them, but they need an interpreter to help them make meaning out of their experience.

And Peter is ready for that moment. Peter steps up as an interpreter. First, Peter re-interprets an ancient text from the Jewish scriptures, from the prophet Joel, about end-times. Peter reinterprets Joel’s prophecy to make it about the end of *one* time, but simultaneously the beginning of a new time, too. *This is it*, Peter says. *What you’re experiencing is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy, that God “will pour out [God’s] Spirit upon all flesh.”* Peter uses this ancient, sacred text to interpret what’s happening right here and now, in this present, sacred moment. He makes meaning out of the experience of Pentecost for everyone there. “What does this mean?” they ask. And Peter’s answer is clear: it means everything is different; all things are made new; and the Spirit of God is with us.

Peter plays the role of interpreter impressively. But, here's the thing: Peter wasn't in my Meaning Making class in seminary. In fact, he never went to seminary. All Peter did to be ready for this moment was to

know his Bible, to follow Jesus in community with others, and to trust in God to give him the wisdom to interpret.

And that's good news for us because it means *we* can do the same thing. You don't need a fancy degree or a high IQ to play the kind of role that Peter played that Pentecost Day. Each and every one of us is capable of using the scripture and tradition of the Church to interpret the Spirit's movement through and among us right now.

And whenever you find yourself in a position to be an interpreter of God's Spirit, I highly recommend the 14th chapter of the John's gospel to help you begin to make meaning.

Jesus sits at table with his disciples on the night before he is crucified. He promises them that, when it's all over, when he is no longer with them in the same way that he is now, God "will give [them] another Advocate, to be with you forever... the Spirit of truth."

To hear God's Spirit called the Advocate may make us expect to see a lawyer in a three-piece-suit show up. But the Greek word "Paraclete" that John's Gospel uses here doesn't have that connotation. The Paraclete is not so much a lawyer arguing for us, but is better translated as "one who comes alongside." Jesus promises his disciples that when he is no longer among them, there will be another to come alongside them.

And then Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Now, that's a tall order. Jesus says all this on the night he was betrayed. He and his disciples are about to be plunged into a terrible and fearful night. They will be accosted and accused by religious and imperial authorities. His disciples will watch as Jesus is tortured and then for three days they will live in fear for their own lives and in the grief and shock of Jesus' death. How will they keep from feeling troubled and fearful?

Like those earliest disciples, we, too, have reasons to be troubled. We have so many reasons to be afraid: globally and locally, politically and personally, there is much wrong in our world, much to cause grief and pain, anger and anxiety. The despair of it can feel overwhelming.

But Jesus has promised us that in these times of trouble, "the Father will give [us] another," the Paraclete. In fear and in anguish, in strife and stress and uncertainty, at the heights of great joy and in the depths of our suffering, God's Spirit comes alongside us.

And not just us. Jesus' promise is that God's Spirit is right there alongside all of God's people, in all times and all places. But they may not be able to recognize it. Sometimes, often times, we are not able to understand where and how the Spirit moves among us. We are not always able to find meaning in this mess of a world.

And that's when we need each other. Each of us, like Peter, is called to be an interpreter. Just as God's Spirit comes alongside of us in times of need, in that same Spirit, we are called to come alongside each other. In the midst of another's joy or suffering, in their confusion or their celebration, we are called to step in and help make meaning of it all – not with trite clichés or shallow sentiment, but with our presence and our prayers. We are called to witness the movement of the Spirit alongside each other, in this and every moment, that together, we may "rejoice in [her] holy comfort; through Jesus Christ [...] our Lord." Amen.