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"Many Gifts"

Numbers 11:24-30 John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21 I Corinthians 12:3b-13 13

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS 11:24-30

Have you ever missed a meeting? This morning's passage from Numbers 11 tells of two men, who missed a very important meeting. This morning we are celebrating the birth of the church. This passage is a foreshadowing of that day when the Spirit comes upon 70 elders that made the meeting ...and 2 that didn't.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 20:19-23

In our gospel lesson the disciples are gathered in the Upper Room the night that Jesus rose from the dead. One of the eleven original disciples, Thomas, missed the meeting. Jesus would give him a second chance a week later, but on this night Jesus appeared to them to put their fears at ease, proclaimed peace and introduced them to a new level of the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION TO I CORINTHIANS 12:4-13

In the 2nd chapter of the Acts of the Apostles everyone made the meeting but all of them were moved beyond the privacy of the Upper Room to the public display in the open courtyard. The Holy Spirit was now bestowed on more than 72 elders following Moses and on more than 10 disciples following Jesus, but upon men and women, young and old. There was unity in the Spirit, but diversity in their experience and in the gifts they received from the Spirit. Hear Paul's description of how the Spirit worked through their lives and works through our lives even now. Hear the word of the Lord from I Corinthians 12:4-13.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION let's pray. O Holy Spirit, breathe on us this morning. Open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our minds to receive your word. Open our hearts to feel your love. Open our souls to sense your touch. Open our mouths to sing your praise and share your love with all we meet. As we open this, your word, speak to us of eternal things, and as we listen may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

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Someone once said that all you need to gather an audience is to start a fire. People WILL gather to watch it burn. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove. When the disciples were baptized with the Spirit, the Spirit came in flames.

Reminiscent of the Burning Bush that wasn't burning that called Moses to set his people free from bondage in Egypt, the disciples had flames above their heads but they were not burned. The tongues of fire over their heads lit up the tongues in their heads to start praising God until they ran out of Hebrew.

The crowd that gathered was bewildered because they were each one hearing the disciples speak in his own language. These uneducated Galileans were not making

strange babbling sounds but were speaking in recognizable languages. The languages were not their native languages, but the languages of Jews from around the known world. It was an oratory AND an auditory miracle. The scripture says that EACH (singular) heard THEM (plural) speaking in their native language. Fifteen different languages were being HEARD. The Medes heard the 120 speaking Farsi. The Arabs heard 120 people speaking Arabic. The Romans heard the 120 people speaking Italian.

That event was the birth of the church we celebrate today. The Miracle of Pentecost says to us that the Gospel isn't just for people who speak Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek. It isn't just for people who speak English or Spanish or Swahili, or Chinese or Indonesian. It is for all people everywhere--rich people, poor people, people of every nationality, people who are saints and people who are sinners.

In less than 100 years the fire of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was carried as far as Spain to the west, India to the east, and Ethiopia to the south. It subsequently took several hundred years for the Gospel to arrive in the northern reaches of Europe, but it did and from Europe it came to our nation, a nation of nations, and a nation of immigrants.

In our Numbers passage the Spirit was poured out on 72 men. In our passage from John the Spirit was given to 10 men. But in the Acts passage, the Spirit was poured out on men and women.

In 1860, Susan B. Anthony, called on Editor Horace Greeley to ask for his newspaper's support for women's right to vote. Greeley was not sympathetic. He was an opponent of women's rights, mainly because he considered women to be of no military value. "What would you do," he asked, "in the event of a civil war?"

"I would do just what you would do," Susan Anthony replied. "I would sit in my office and write articles urging other people to go and fight." (1)

Not only did the coming of the Spirit break down the walls between genders, it also broke down the wall between nations and nationalities and race.

It was on a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, South Africa that a middle-aged and apparently quite wealthy South African woman found herself sitting next to a black man. As the passengers were filing in and taking their seats she called a member of the cabin crew to ask about her seating. "What seems to be the matter, madam?" asked the attendant.

"Can't you see?" the woman responded. "You have assigned me a seat next to a kaffir (a pejorative word referring to a native black African). I cannot possibly sit next to this disgusting human being. Please find me another seat as soon as possible!"

The cabin attendant, hearing the words and observing the commotion that was clearly stirring among other passengers, commented, "Please calm down, madam. The flight is very full today but I will do what I can. I will go and check on availability of seats in business or first classes."

Meanwhile the woman, with a scowl on her face, looked at the black man beside her, who was outraged, not to mention many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later the attendant returned with good news that she delivered to the woman, who continued to look at her fellow passengers with a smug and self-satisfied grin. The flight attendant told the woman, "Madame, unfortunately, as I suspected economy is full. I have spoken to the cabin services director and business class is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class."

Before the woman had a chance to answer, the flight attendant continued, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade; I needed to receive special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With that the flight attendant turned to the black man sitting next to the woman and said, "So if you would like to gather your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you." At that point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation as the African man walked triumphantly into first class.

Picture a world where all people looked, spoke, acted, and thought alike. It would be like entering a shoe store and finding only one style or going to a car dealership that offered only one make or model of car or finding only one brand of cereal in the grocery store-- and it was Fruity Pebbles. Yet, as is evidenced by the story of the passengers on the plane and, too often unfortunately in the world around us, indeed in our own lives at times, we value unity at the expense of diversity.

Most of the time, our rejection of diversity is subtle. We choose not to associate with certain people, either individuals or collective groups. There are times we never consider another person's idea, way of doing things, or attitude if it differs from ones we hold. We isolate ourselves from what we do not like or simply do not wish to deal with. Most probably we don't even realize that we are rejecting diversity. Rather, we say to ourselves, "I simply have different ideas than others."

I got a call yesterday from Mohammed Kahn, the leader of the Mosque here in Baytown. They are celebrating the month of Ramadan where they fast from dawn to sunset. At the end of each day they gather for a breaking of the fast. He invited me to join them after I return from my week away. He didn't invite me to join in the fast but I'm going to try my best to join him ... at least that day.

Too often, however, people openly reject diversity, even in a hostile way. That was certainly the case with the woman on the plane. We may not make a scene as did the woman, but in our minds and actions we are as closed as she was. Such attitudes stunt our growth.

The destructive force of a world without diversity has, unfortunately, been repeated too often in history. The suppression of native people in the New World and the perceived need to have one and only one culture deprived the world of a few significant civilizations, such as the Aztec, Mayan, and Inca native people in Mexico and South America. Religious wars in Europe, the infamous crusades of medieval times, and many

wars between rival Christian factions were fought basically because people were not open to different understandings of God--think Calvinism versus Arminianism.

Certainly such actions were an overt denial of Jesus' message of inclusivity. Intolerance in ways of thinking, politically and socially, generated the Soviet State's control of the "Iron Curtain" countries after World War II. Rejection of the Jews as a race, culture, and religion led to the Holocaust. Today's terrorism leads to the bombing of a concert in Manchester and yesterday's tragedy on London Bridge.

In Christ we are equal, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. We are equal but we are not the same. There is one Spirit, but many gifts-many different gifts. Paul talks about those gifts in the part of his letter that we read. No one has all the gifts but all of us have at least one.

Did you know that not all of us in this church have the same tastes? Some people are comforted by the old hymns. Inwardly they groan when they're asked to learn something new. Others are groan when it comes to the old hymns, they want to learn something new. For some, singing is the high point of the service; others wouldn't mind if we dispensed with the music altogether. I imagine some would rather not have sermons. ☺ or would like shorter ones at least ☺

Although our methods may be different, we must use the gifts we possess and our varied cultures to assist others toward the common goal of sharing God's love. Openness to what is different is key to appreciating the power, goodness, and strength that can come from diversity. I hope our name tag exercise this morning has given us a sense of the many places from which we have come.

Theologian and poet Pádraig Ó Tuama tells a moving story in his book, "In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World." He is Irish and lived for a time in Melbourne, Australia. He took a walk late one night, wandering the city in grief after learning of the suicide of a childhood friend. As he walked he says:

"I saw a man who seemed distressed. I stopped to ask if he wanted directions, and as he replied it was clear that he was Deaf. I owned a Sign Language dictionary and had perused it for years, and so I was delighted to practice my limited knowledge. He told me he was French and had only arrived in the city that day. ... He was looking for the train station and I said to come with me.

"We walked, and I stumbled through his fluent language. He was happy to have met someone who could speak a few words of his language and I was delighted at the happy chance to talk. ... When we said goodbye at the train station, he grabbed both my slow hands in his and I felt his warmth and fluency and we shared a joy of being human in the city."

Yesterday I had someone come to look at a place in my roof that needs patching. Two men came to my door. One spoke broken English. I speak broken Spanish. I introduced myself to the first man, but the other just stood smiling, bright eyed. When I

spoke to him the first man said, "He no can hear or talk." I shook his hand and smiled and nodded. We were three people with three languages, two trying to speak each other's language and one speaking in smiles.

God loves us and calls us to love one another--to love the man who got bumped up to first class on the plane... and to love the woman who got him bumped—to love her out of her prejudice.

Pastor Rick Kirchoff, once put it this way: When the Spirit comes, barriers are broken, communities are formed, opposites are reconciled, unity is established, disease is cured, addiction is broken, cities are renewed, races are reconciled, hope is established, people are blessed, and church happens.

When the Spirit comes, discouraged folks cheer up, dishonest folks 'fess up, sour folks sweeten up, closed folk, open up, gossipers shut up, conflicted folks make up, sleeping folks wake up, lukewarm folk, fire up, dry bones shake up, and pew potatoes stand up! (3)

The Promised Holy Spirit came to clear up the confusion...so the misunderstood could understand...We may not agree with certain ways of doing things, but we cannot dismiss them out of hand. Such behavior not only contradicts the message of Paul and his diversity of spiritual gifts for the common good, but also it betrays the whole life of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.. Let us live as One People filled with One Spirit, learning and speaking each other's language through our ... many gifts.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we love you because you first loved us. From the moment we are born we are loved by you. From the moment we are born we are designed to be loved by those who conceived us. Sometimes we are. Sometimes we are not. We know we are designed to love you and to love each other and to even love those who persecute us and say all manner of evil against us. Give us the grace to love like you love.

We give you thanks for the Holy Spirit, who guides us, and gives us gifts by which to respond to your calling. Help us to use our time wisely, to apportion our talents so that others will rejoice. You amaze us, O God, with the breadth of your love. You continue to fill us with the breath of your Spirit. For all your mercies we give you thanks.

We thank you for the new beginning for Alice at her baptism. May we as her church family give her the support and training and encouragement and love that she will need as we look forward to the gifts that she brings. These things we pray in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

- 1) Joe Claro, The Random House Book of Jokes and Anecdotes.
- 2) Pádraig Ó Tuama In the Shelter: Finding a home in the world
- 3) Rick Kirchoff, Germantown United Methodist Church