

Acts 2:1-21: Sermon by HPC High School Seniors
Pentecost Sunday, 19 May 2024, Highland Presbyterian Church

Harper Hall

In middle school, my Spanish teacher used to say “Al que madruga, Dios lo ayuda” which translates to “the early bird gets the worm.” I spent a long time being very confused over this phrase, because it literally translates to “Those who get up early are helped by God,” and middle school me could not comprehend that this could be an idiom my teacher was using to awake our sleepy minds and motivate us to start conjugating verbs. I’ve been learning Spanish since Kindergarten, but due to a scheduling conflict my junior year of high school I did not take a year of Spanish, and therefore when I was put in an International Baccalaureate Spanish class this year, I struggled immensely.

Like the crowd in the text, I was extremely confused when I realized that my amazing teacher, Señora Suarez, almost exclusively taught the class in Spanish, and I realized that I was going to fail miserably if I didn’t start practicing more often. So I did. I participated in class discussions, watched TV in Spanish, and had lots of bumpy Spanglish conversations with Annie.

On this day of Pentecost, it's essential to remember in a world filled with perfection and high expectations, it's important to just try. Whether it's instances like me trying to learn Spanish again, or trying to bridge the cultural divide through working with organizations like the Kentucky Refugee Ministries, every effort we give against the building polarization in our communities is valuable. Unlike the crowd in the text, we have to be willing to overstep whatever political, economic, or social barrier may be in front of us to aid communities in need. We are often bystanders to injustice because we are scared to become involved, and we are often impatient and unwilling to listen to complicated situations of inequity. Instead of building up other communities, we tear them down through an unwillingness to listen, distancing ourselves from the stark reality of the injustice our society perpetuates.

Through remembering we all undergo the same human experience, we can use empathy and hope to uplift other communities in pursuit of an equitable and just world. The Holy Spirit calls us to action, calls us to use our privilege and our gifts to enact positive change. As the Holy Spirit called the crowd in the text to action through bestowing the ability to speak and understand different languages, the Holy Spirit has called us to lift up other communities for the common good. Highland Presbyterian Church has taught me what it means to be part of a community. Our different organizations devoted to helping others and sustaining our church has impacted my life immensely. Most importantly, I find community in the people that the Holy Spirit has called to surround me at Highland. A member of this church spends time each summer making every youth a “Brown Paper Bag” filled with snacks and supplies to support us in our faith journeys at Montreat. Sara Gahan always greets me with a big smile and a hug when I see her Sunday morning. Patricia Connally dried my tears in the bathroom when being in the Sanctuary was so overwhelming that I couldn’t sit through a service. Kevin Burns is almost the sole reason why I understand the Bible. My parents supported my faith journey in every way possible, pouring their time and energy into making me the person I am today. Michael, Kelli, Kim, John, Steve, Kimberlee, and Becky have been some of my biggest supporters, advocating, comforting, and

laughing with me. Youth group gave me my best friends, and I can't imagine my life without God leading me to Highland, to them. When I walk into Youth Group every Sunday evening, I can take a breath and feel like I've entered my second home. That would not be possible without all of the love and support this congregation expresses.

In reference to the bewilderment the crowd felt surrounded by the Holy Spirit and other languages, Acts 2, verse 12 states "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." Highland, I encourage you to be the people that listen closely, that empathize with others to be the advocates against injustice. I call us to open our doors and to be a home for others, even if that incites feelings of discomfort. Let us open our hearts and minds to new ways of thinking, and commit to bridging the barrier between communities like the crowds in the text, working together to face the problems ever so present in our society.

Amelia Connally

Despite all this division, confusion, and misunderstanding, there is good news! Amidst the chaos of the holy spirit, Peter guides the crowd away from their judgment and towards amazement. Through his sermon, we learn that these people were not drunk, but they were filled with the holy spirit, allowing them to speak of God's power in different languages. Peter curbs the confusion, describing that THIS is the holy spirit, just as Joel described it in the Old Testament. Through Peter, we learn that there is hope for the confused, the chaotic, and the misunderstood in this story. Later in Acts, we learn that these people became the first church, the first community of believers. But this would not be possible without the help of Peter. Peter was the one who said, "I can help. Everything is ok." And Peter provided forgiveness for those who initially judged, helping them understand the Holy Spirit.

The name "Peter" is derived from the Ancient Greek word "petrous", meaning stone or rock. In this situation, Peter is the rock, the foundation, for the first church. He helped the witnesses understand the holy spirit, building trust and deepening faith. When I read this scripture for the first time, Peter really struck me as an important person in the life of the church for that first community of believers.

And as I thought more about Peter, I realized that my Peter was Kevin Burns. Kevin was the rock, the foundation, of my faith. Just as Peter helped those first believers understand and deepen their faith, Kevin did the same for me. Kevin's middle school Sunday school class was where I started to understand and build my faith. Up until that point, I was just at church to have fun and hang out with my friends. But in Kevin's class, I started to really think deeply about church. Suddenly, I wasn't thinking about how many donuts I was allowed to eat, but how the lessons of the bible connected with my own life. Kevin helped me take large, abstract biblical concepts and form them into my own ideas. I learned how to take the uncertainty of faith and put it into terms that I could understand, just as Peter helped the witnesses of the holy spirit understand the bigger picture.

So, just as I have reflected on Kevin as my Peter, I invite you to do the same. Who, or maybe what, is your Peter? Who played a vital role in guiding you to understand and deepen your faith? Who calmed the chaos, cleared the confusion, and righted the misunderstandings? I invite you all to ponder and reflect on who impacted your faith formation.

And through recognizing who our Peters are, how might we strive to act as a Peter for someone else? How can we nurture each other, pushing ourselves to ask hard questions and trust in God? Outside of our faith community, how can we help others find love and peace amidst their chaotic loves?

After Peter helps his listeners understand what is going on, the crowd asks, “What should we do?”. Now that they can grasp the work of the holy spirit, they are looking for guidance in their new way of life. Peter’s answer? Change your hearts and lives. Get baptized. And receive the holy spirit. And so, the first people who welcomed Peter’s message trusted in God, and the first church was born. They devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And so, by accepting the holy spirit, despite the wild disruption, a new way of living and community was opened up for these people.

This scripture gives us hope that amidst the disorder, something good is happening. And even if this behind-the-scenes work might be hard to see, we rely on the Peters in our lives to help us understand, trust the process, and deepen our faith. With Peter’s help, the holy spirit led the first community of believers into a new way of life, even though it was initially confusing and misunderstood. This good news gives us hope for a better way of living as we continue to deepen our faith and accept the holy spirit with open arms.

Annie Parks

As it transitions into my part of the sermon, I realize that some of you may not know me very well. I mean sure, you have a pamphlet in your hands explaining exactly who I am and my plans for the next four years, but my face is probably not one which rings a bell for many. I’m what I would like to call a “late bloomer” in the church. I didn’t really grow up here, I mean I went to Highland Pres Preschool School and did a Christmas pageant or two, but my family wasn’t the type to show up every Sunday. And yet, 7 years ago, something called me here....and there’s debate on what this something was. My moms are convinced it had something to do with the Sunday school donuts, courtesy of Kevin, but that’s not a good look for me. I guess if someone were to ask me what drew me back to church, I would say people. At that time in my life I was craving a deeper level of connection. I was looking for a companion, someone to pull me through thick and thin, who I could talk to about anything, who made living feel easier for the overflowing bucket of emotions that I was. I was looking for a best friend. But in these walls I found something better. I found sisters. Oh yeah, and God.

Though I didn’t feel the fires of Pentecost burning through me, there was a new degree of love with these girls, like somehow we had all gotten swept up by the world and dropped on Highland’s doorstep, as if God knew we needed each other. They were, and are, my

Peters. Despite all the confusion, fear, and disruption in the world they are the ones who pull me back to safety. They are people who require nothing more of me than to simply be.

This leads me to my favorite portion of the Pentecost story. Immediately following Peter's call to worship, a sense of peace washes over the followers of Jesus, new and old. While they were once divided due to religion, ethnicity, and language, the formation of the church restored order and created a faith driven community full of those elated to share the glory of God with each other and the world around them. Sometimes in a world filled with turmoil, we feel a struggle to exist, feeling called to provide aid to a suffering world while simultaneously paralyzed by the amount of work waiting to be done. We see those around us sharing God's love abundantly, even inside our own congregation through organizations such as We of the World, Nicaragua Under the Sun, and volunteer work with Kentucky Refugee Ministries. This work is astounding and offers a beautiful glimpse of what can be accomplished when we come together in fellowship, however, it is natural in the busy lives we lead, to struggle in finding the time or energy to commit to large projects. I don't consider myself a very "good" Christian. My schedule this year has made it difficult to attend youth events and many Sunday mornings I choose rest over coming to worship. I'm not a big prayer, finding more connection to God through nature and writing rather than direct communication. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy, the thought that maybe I'm not faithful enough or that I'm not a good or kind enough person.

But in Acts 2:46 through 47, I find solace in my commitment to my faith: "Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved." It's the use of the word simplicity in this translation which sticks out the most to me. When Peter first encouraged the crowd to convert, he knew God did not expect complete sacrifice of them. In order to become Christian, the crowd did not need to donate their life savings to charity or travel to foreign lands and spread the word of Christ. There was no dotted line to sign promising they would pray every night or attend every gathering or become ministers. Instead Peter, and God, make a plain request. That they meet. That they eat. That they follow God's word and treat others with kindness. And while I see extraordinary work being piloted by this congregation, I am equally astounded by our beautiful simplicity. The act of us gathering here today. To not only praise God but to celebrate the contributions that us young people have made to our community as we have begun to explore and embrace our faith. I am gracious for every Sunday school donut, and youth group overnight. Every shared Costco cake, game of ultimate frisbee, passing of peace, and communion. I am overwhelmed by the love we each put into each song, baptism, and confirmation. This is the good community that God intended to create. These are the Peter's, sitting around you, your rocks in this unpredictable world who are waiting to guide and support you. This is what it looks like to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to wake up and choose union over division, faith over fear, worship over waiting for things to change. This is the purpose of the church. To create a common language and lifestyle that is built upon well, put simply, love.