

ACTS 2:1-21

PSALM 104:24-34, 35b

I CORINTHIANS 12:3b-13

JOHN 7:37-39

Day of Pentecost

May 28, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

***Drink This Deeply!***

**You may be happy to know that nowhere in the Bible does it say that getting drunk is a sin, you know, inebriated, soused, pick your favorite! Nowhere does the Bible call this a punishable offense. Not that it matters to anyone in this room! But hey, it is a holiday weekend in a tourist town! Getting drunk, privately or publicly, is not listed among the abominations, that word used 116 times, recorded throughout the Hebrew Bible, according to Jacob Milgrom. That being said, as experience has taught many of us—no true confessions here—getting drunk is frequently met with dire consequences, a hangover perhaps the least of our worries, the least problematic. Come to think of it, I would love to hear a drunk person pronounce all the names in the Pentecost story from the book of Acts! I am just saying!** Just off the top of my head, I can think of two instances right off the bat in the Bible where getting drunk turned out to be a very bad thing. There is the story of Noah and his son Ham who observed his naked daddy, a serious no, no, as his father slept off a heavy round of imbibement. Yes, there is an implication in the verb “to know, or knew, within the text of this sordid story, more than meets the eye but it is a Sunday morning! There is the story of Lot and his daughters and their tango in a cave after that nasty Sodom and Gomorrah debacle. Sobriety would have served them both well! And finally, there is the story of the

heroine Jael and the villain Sisera. After plying him with warm milk, oh wait, we were developing a demon rum theme here, Jael drove a tent peg through Sisera's sleeping head, a most egregious, inhospitable violation, a breach of the protocols of ancient Near Eastern hospitality. Beware any libation, no matter its alcohol content! **Today we read once again the amazing story from what became the Christian version of the day of Pentecost, this long held tradition, a part of the Jewish calendar also called Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, a Judaic celebration of the harvest festival, most notably providing the backdrop for the love story found in the book of Ruth.**

**This morning we explore the difference between spirits and the Spirit, a convergence that would have never happened save for the wild goings on that took place on this first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection. As we all know well, none of us drinks at nine o'clock in the morning unless we are having a Mimosa, a delightfully refreshing elixir that the ancients did not have. According to the naysayers back on this bellwether day, there had to be a good reason for all this babble taking place and the explanation by all means had to have something to do with intoxication. The gift of the Spirit was not an option for the doubters and the scoffers reveling in their ritualistic piosity. From a distance it is always easy to point fingers, to ridicule, make value judgments, to make quick assumptions, to drink the Kool Aid of popular opinion, taking the paths of least resistance, the least common denominators of simplistic, shortsighted, assessments. Of course, these free spirits, so to speak, were drunk, every last one of them! After all, what else could it be? What else was making them act so differently, behaving in such a strange, most peculiar and odd, manner, all of them speaking nonsensical sentences, bizarre utterances, that sounded like mishmash, gobbledygook, except that they were not! They were speaking in their own native tongue! Look at those fools! They have no decency, no manners, no decorum! This is embarrassing, watching these idiots humiliate themselves! Their**

**mommas and daddies would be ashamed! And so, the stage is now set for our celebration of Pentecost, right here, right now, one of the big three feast days on the liturgical calendar, even if and when this grand festival day is treated like the poor stepchild of the Church Year compared to Christmas and Easter.**

**Luke's telling of the story of Pentecost here at the beginning of the Acts of the apostles is a gateway text, a harbinger of things to come, preparing the way for the rapid expansion of the fledgling Church once it had been unceremoniously disfellowshipped, forced to leave the safe cocoon of Judaism to chart its own course and embrace a gentile world that they would soon ironically gladly encounter. This rendition of Pentecost was an inflection point, a game changer, yes, a fork in the road that was anything but a dead-end street. No U-turns allowed! Those who were lucky enough to be in whatever that one special place was, were privy to an experience that defied all logic and explanation, all the proceedings way beyond words, and yet, as always with our Bible, it is words that are all we have. The writer was vainly attempting to describe the indescribable, explain the unexplainable, to imagine the unimaginable, and yet, here it all is, captured in language in what surely must have seemed like, felt like, a frozen moment in time. What an amazingly transformational experience of transcendent awe and wonder producing mystery it surely must have been. What an experience! And now it is our turn to capture and be captured by the Spirit and by whatever miraculous, magical, moment once upon a time grabbed the attention of some folks who no doubt thought they were once again perhaps just going to play a game of let's pretend, to go through the motions of ritual monotony, dutifully gathering for another typical, nothing unusual, ho-hum, Pentecost observance, obedient as a puppy. What a surprise was in store for what turned out to be an anything but ordinary street festival.**

Despite the surprise that was awaiting this Jewish contingent, it will come as no surprise, no shock at all, for you to hear that I consider this story to be but one more in a long line, an ongoing series, another installment in a winding string, of hospitality texts found in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures. For it is in this first century edition, another Pentecost rendition, that we see, not only the birthday of the Church, not only the coming of the Holy Spirit, but we see the gospel now unleashed, unbound and let go, yes, unhinged, or, as the late New Testament scholar Frank Stagg once described it, “unhindered” as it was set free as an open invitation, hospitably welcoming and inclusive to all persons. This sectarian version of Judaism, characterized by those who had become “followers of the way,” the way of Jesus, that is, a movement which would evolve into Christianity, would not in any way be restricted to those born into its confines, but would be a faith thrust far beyond the borders of Israel, escaping its richest nationalistic traditions, transcending tribe and clan, until it would meet and be weighed down with its own institutional crises and forced limitations.

**Yes, I consider this a hospitality text, but certainly not in the way that I interpret other scriptures carrying that theme. This Pentecost moment, captured by Luke the historian and physician, is a reminder that God is not a respecter of persons while respecting every person. The level of affirmation on display in this wildly technicolor drama reveals an event portraying the very DNA of a lovingly gracious God. The galvanizing things these visitors to Jerusalem had in common was their love for God and neighbor, obviously one another, including their faith, their piety, and their Jewish heritage, the ties that bind.** Now, we are never told that these unsuspecting recipients of the Holy Spirit were Jewish followers of Jesus. Luke tells us they were Jews, revealing nothing else about their religious affiliations. We quickly wonder how it came about that they all came to be together in that sacred time and space, finding themselves in one place, as different, as

diverse, as they no doubt were based on their countries of origin. The list reads like a roll call at the United Nations. And they were not speaking glossolalia, that is, speaking in tongues, invoking what is often a quick “misinterpretive” read associated with this Acts text, a different twist on “God is still speaking!” No, each was speaking their own language, in their native tongue, and yet, they all understood each other perfectly well, another United Nations kind of image. Now the skeptic in me simply wonders, despite their distinct vernacular, if the writer was possibly trying to convey, to indicate that the same language meant they merely understood their common language of faith. Always got to raise the question. But no, the writer is too detailed, too precise, making sure we know that this was an unfolding manifestation of what we joyfully call in the United Church of Christ the “still speaking Spirit of God.” There was definitely something in the air, delightfully amiss, something strange and wonderful and intoxicating to the point that everyone looked like and acted like they were drunk! Drink this deeply!

**And of course, there were doubters and skeptics, scoffers! There always are! But the irony of their presence, their disdain and disgust, their hyper-negative assessment of the proceedings, lends even more credence to Luke’s fascinatingly detailed description, his profoundly meticulous recall of the day. Peter obviously had enough of their ridicule and their ill-founded accusations. It was time to preach. Always the disciple with the built in megaphone, this apostle sometimes infected with a bad case of foot-in-mouth disease, Peter seizes the stage and the moment. This thrice denier now fully reengaged and recommitted, boldly blaring above all the wondrously noisy hysteria in this God-driven cacophony of sound, a divine version of noisy gongs and clanging symbols, cutting through the echoes and what may have been the mounting tension. Peter preaches as if his audience was far larger than the text shows it to have been! He preaches as if his life depended on this one sermon. And like any good preacher worth her or his salt, Peter goes straight to the biblical**

playbook, quoting from a scripture he had long heard and obviously memorized from all his times gathered with friends and family in the synagogues and the Temple. Yes, the Rock had heard these stories since childhood, long before he met Jesus, but every verse clearly galvanized and reinforced by the rabbi he had dutifully followed for three very short years. He had learned well! He quotes from the prophet Joel, a prophecy, that while referring to “all people” most likely was a promise made solely, exclusively, to the children of Israel. Just an educated hunch! But Peter had other ideas as he proclaimed his witness regarding this most “extravagant welcome,” another UCC slogan of which we proudly shout like voices crying in the wilderness, juxtaposed against our closed, exclusive, insular, tribal and clannish, world. Peter, just like his rabbi during his brief life, just like all the other disciples, was in the midst of change, change of heart and mind, an evolutionary transformation revealing that the message of God through the emissary Jesus was a message that was extravagantly welcoming, expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable. “Hunching,” new verb here, one more time, my guess is that this unlimited expansion was far beyond the prophet Joel’s infinite or limited imagination, as open or as closed as it might have been. This new but very old prophecy was simply beyond belief, too good to be true, but it was! All people! Men and women! Young and old! These words would now portend the proclamation of the apostle Paul who boldly declared that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free, slavery, always acknowledged, an unfortunate dynamic of the ancient world and unfortunately even in our recent history as a nation. And today, we would add a whole list of fabulous adjectives defining various people groups, defining characteristics, wonderful attributes, embodiments that reveal the beauty of the wide spectrum of God’s diverse rainbow of the human creation. And you all know the list well. Usually, it “includes” everybody that narrow, sectarian, white nationalist narcissists bigots and racists despise and fear! Some just cannot come to the party!

In today's Witness from the Epistles in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the former Pharisee discusses his understanding of this mystery that is the Christly Spirit of God that moves within and among us. He reminds his reader, then and now, that no one proclaims that "Jesus is Lord," except via the Holy Spirit and then reminds us of all the spiritual gifts that are ours to enjoy, all the ministries we can engage, all the activities that make life grand, the exciting adventure that living is, all produced by the God who produced us! It is this Spirit that gives us wisdom, knowledge, the gift of faith and of healing, our ability to be in community, in relationship, to have empathy, offering a sympathetic ear, everything that allows us to engage one another to our fullest, emboldening and empowering us to be fully human. Paul declares that we are capable of miracles, privy to whatever constitutes miracle in this life, and that we have the gift of prophecy, that just like Joel and Peter and all the biblical giants of the faiths of old, that we can tell our stories, particularly the story of our faith journey, how we have gotten to where we are, the evolutionary journey that is uniquely our own. Paul then talks about the ability to discern tongues, something that is beyond my paygrade as a preacher or teacher of biblical stuff! Good luck with that one! Paul tells us that all these wonderful and wondrous things that are ours to enjoy are produced by the one Spirit, that though giving each of us our own set of unique gifts, binds us together as one because we drink from the same source. Baptized into one body, no matter "who we are or where we are on life's journey" Paul declares that we were all given one Spirit to drink. Wow, what a wonderful image! Drink this! Drink this deeply! As the writer of John says in the Gospel that bears his name, "All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink!" After all, "as the scriptures said concerning me, 'rivers of living water will flow out from within him.'" Ah, the difference between spirits and the Spirit. Evidently, so easily confused! But the one who drinks from either "well" surely knows the difference.

**Yes, it is nine o'clock in the morning, or a little thereafter, may we all drink deeply from this well, the miraculous wine of living water called the very Spirit of God. Drink all you can! The Spirit will make more! Come to think of it, Jesus did that too! And, not only that, but this supposed glutton once owned the label "drunkard" as a badge of honor! May we be so accused! May it be so for us! May we be found so guilty! Guilty as charged! Guilty! Guilty! Guilty! And graced with every drop of the Spirit's leading. Another round, please! Sign us up!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and indeed makes us drunk with the very Spirit of God, our cups overflowing! Amen and amen.**