

Text: Acts 2: 1-12
Title: A Wheel, a Tower, a Bridge, and Fire
Date: 05.23.10
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Things fall apart in this world.
Have you ever noticed?
Have you ever felt it?

Things fall apart in this world.
Bodies breakdown. Joints wear out, hair falls out, and hearts putter out. Relationships rupture. Couples split up, families break up, and companies go bankrupt. Buildings crumble, towers tumble, cars rust, and businesses go bust. Empires fall, stock markets crash, economies collapse, oil spills, jobs disappear, mortgages are foreclosed, memories fade, and people get lost....

Things fall apart in this world.
Have you ever noticed?
Have you ever felt it?
Have you ever felt like your life was breaking up into little pieces and you couldn't hold it all together?

In our text this morning the disciples knew that things fall apart. The Jesus they followed had been crucified. They had seen him in some resurrected form, but now he was gone again. He told them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, but they weren't even sure what that meant. It all felt fragile and uncertain. So, they were huddled together waiting. They wondered and worried and waited. They didn't know what else to do. Things fall apart in this world.

The disciples were Jews living under Roman occupation. It was a bustling multi-cultural world, but they lived as a fractured diaspora ~ their family cast all over the known world. There was no center that held things together ~ everything was broken up in pieces. They were strangers in their own country; homeless in their homeland. They were waiting for something to change that or change them.....

And, then one day there blew a violent wind,
then one day there came a fire,
then one day the very Spirit of God came,
then one day God breathed,
then one day everything changed.

Fifty days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension, on a Jewish holiday, the disciples went from wondering and waiting to proclaiming the wonders of God in every tongue under heaven. They went from huddling in a house to being the center of attention in Jerusalem. Everything changed because one day the Holy Spirit came upon them in a new and powerful way.

Dear friends, I am not sure that the gift of Pentecost is the ability to speak different languages without the benefit of language classes. I am not sure the lesson is that you can learn Spanish quickly by the power of the Holy Spirit, despite what a student and minister told me once....

And, I am not sure that the pouring out of the Spirit is necessarily about getting all caught up in “Holy Ghost power,” where you shake, quake, and rattle snake in a personal ecstatic experience of God’s presence.

But, I am sure that the gift of the Holy Spirit is about the hub of the wheel.

The list in our text of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Capadocians, Pontusians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyans, Cryenes, and visitors from Rome, reads like spokes of a wheel stretching out in all directions from the hub. It is not a random list. With Jerusalem as the center, Luke ~ the author ~ lists the people and places of the farthest reaches of the world as they knew it. So, maybe that little list is not so much about the power of miraculous tongues, as it is about the power of God reaching to every corner of creation. This is about every spoke of wheel being connected to the hub.

This is about the shape of the church, not the shape of language.

This is about changing their understanding of what God is doing in Christ, not just changing what they spoke, or what they felt.

I caught a glimpse of this when I was in my early twenties. I left a small town in Iowa that had one stop light and landed on the corner of 109th and Michigan Ave. I was a freshly scrubbed urban virgin and a student intern at Roseland Christian Ministries. But, on Good Friday in the spring of 1981, before I was supposed to meet my trendy-yuppie-friends at a north-side watering hole, I went to a worship service at RCM. I don’t remember the sermon or the service; I remember how it ended.

The doors were pushed open a crack ~ you could hear the sounds of the city coming alive in spring: people were hollering, buses were rumbling, somebody was grillin’ something, somebody was selling something, the sound of a siren, the smell of wine and cheap perfume....

And, as the service closed we stood in a circle, held hands, and sang the “black doxology.” Same words ~ different tune. And, maybe it was a fire, maybe it was a mighty wind, maybe it was the breath of God, but I looked around the circle and saw a young couple from Korea, and a woman from Jamaica with her baby boy and her two beautiful preschool daughters, and a middle-aged white woman, and a handful of black teenagers, and a man from Haiti, and two white high school kids of Dutch ancestry, and an older black woman who had taken me under her wing and called me family....

And, we lifted up our hands as the doxology built and I caught a glimpse of the hub of the wheel ~ humanity gathered in Christ. And, for me, everything changed.

Things fall apart in this world. But, the Pentecost story is like the story of the Tower of Babel in reverse, for rather than the confusion of speech, this is the unifying of creation. Rather than the scattering of nations, this is the unifying of nations. Rather than a curse this is a promise. Rather than things falling apart this is about things being put back together.

Paul writes about it this way:

God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things

Or,

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two thus making peace.

The purpose of God in Christ is to restore creation to the unity, wholeness, and *shalom* for which it was intended.

All that is lost will be restored.

All that is broken will be repaired.

All that is fractured will be reconciled.

All that is fallen apart will be renewed.

All that is dead will be resurrected. Thanks be to God.

For, if things fall apart in this world, and if God in Christ is restoring this broken creation to its God-willed intention, then the gift of the Holy Spirit is that wind, power, life, fire, or energy that moves all things toward that restoration.

The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to move, blow, empower, all thing under the Lordship of Christ.

The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to move, blow, empower, all things to the wholeness, life, and *shalom* for which they were intended.

The activity of the Holy Spirit is the movement of all things to the hub of the wheel.

Now, how that happens in this world is complicated and messy and never very easy. But, we're here together this morning because last winter there were folks from Hope and folks from Roseland sitting around a table talking about how best we could be in partnership together. We were trying to dream dreams, see visions, and develop ways that together we could be closer to the hub. It is hard to worship together all the time ~ there are different styles and different cultures. It is hard to know how best to listen and learn and help one another because our collective histories are complex. It is hard to know where to start with repentance and repair and reconciliation....

But, at that meeting Sabrina Beecham said, "We've always had bridges; we just need to walk across them." So, even if this is just one small symbol ~ we are trying to walk across bridges together. Our prayer is that this morning's worship is a little glimpse of God's purpose in Christ ~ expressed by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

We gather at this table as a symbol of that.

We gather for a bar-b-que and a potluck as a symbol of that.

And, it will be awkward and sweaty and slow, but we are a lot closer to the purpose of God in Christ when we are together than when we're apart.

A few weeks ago while I was running, listening to my i-pod, lost in the flow of the music and trying to squeeze one more mile out of this old body, the song that shuffled up was Hezekiah Walker's, "I Need You." The song before was probably something fluffy by the Black Eyed Peas and the song after was probably something profound by Johnny Cash. But, wedged there in

the middle was “I Need You.” And, the lyrics washed over me, and tears welled up in me, and I probably looked a little silly running with my hands up....

Maybe it was a fire,
maybe it was a mighty wind,
maybe it was the breath of God.

*I need you, you need me. We're all part of God's family.
Stand with me. Agree with me. We're all part of God's family.
I pray for you. You pray for me. I need you to survive.*

I went home and called the choir director and asked him to work up that song for this morning. So, we'll do our best “white boy” version, and you all jump in and sing along whenever you feel the wind blow. And, we'll all stand with the choir and with each other

Things fall apart in this world.

Have you ever noticed?

Have you ever felt it?

Have you ever felt like your life was breaking up into little pieces and you couldn't hold it all together?

Dear friends, the purpose of God is to bring all things together under Christ.

Wherever there is a wind that blows us toward the hub of the wheel ~ that is a holy wind.

Wherever there is a spirit that overturns the tower of Babel ~ that is a holy spirit.

Wherever there is a bridge that moves people toward the *shalom* that God intends ~ that is a holy movement. Wherever there is a breath that stirs life out of death ~ that is the breath of the Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

Let's sing together.

Amen.