

“What Does This Mean? What Shall We Do?”; Pentecost Sermon

Acts 2:1-41 (portions; especially v. 12, 37-39)

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Last week, we read Psalm 131 where we read the humble words of a psalmist saying that she rests contentedly in God, not concerning herself with things that are beyond her comprehension – that are too great and wonderful to fully understand. We celebrated the disposition of unknowing... that there are mysteries that are beyond us in the face of which we say, “I do not know and that is okay.”

Though there are many times when it is exactly right for us to say, “I don’t know,” there are other times when the words “I don’t know” are exactly wrong. It has to do with the tone. There is a way of saying “I don’t know” which reveals the hardness, dismissiveness, and apathy of our human hearts. You’ve heard this tone – you’ve probably voiced this tone yourself: “I don’t know” (said dismissively). I think my dad used to say something to the effect that the seven most troubling words in the English language are these: “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

When asked what the stats are on homelessness and poverty in our city: I don’t know and I don’t care. When faced with someone’s complicated pain: I don’t know how to respond to that (and I really don’t care enough to figure it out). When made aware of the staggering number of refugees looking for safety and life: I don’t know much about that, and I don’t care. When exposed to a kind of religious experience that differs greatly from your own: I do not understand that and I don’t really care to. Not my cup of tea.

In Acts 2, it is 50 days after Passover, and in the Jewish calendar, that is the time for the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. When the people who were gathered for the Feast of Weeks heard the wind and saw the flames and heard the wonders of God spoken with the same tones, but in all different languages, the text says that they were amazed. The Greek word beneath “amazed” is *existeymi* – which means to stand outside oneself – to be thoroughly displaced and thrown out of position. They were amazed and *perplexed*. *Diapereo* – entirely at a loss. They didn’t know what was going on.

Some of them made quick meaning of the situation – concluding that this group of people must be drunk. And maybe some of *those* that said this left the area. “I don’t know

what's going on and I don't care." But not all. Enough of them stuck around... instead of letting their lack of knowledge propel them away from the situation, they asked each other, "What does this mean" (v. 12)? And they stuck around to find out.

Sometimes, the words, "I don't know" or "I don't understand this" are the appropriate conclusion of a matter... But *sometimes*, the words, "I don't know" or "I don't understand this" are the beginning of an epic journey.

I remember a moment in our renewal process, I was at a retreat and talking about the visioning we were doing at Westside, and I felt completely stuck.... I was sharing in the large group and being coached by Jim Herrington and I said, "I don't know what I'm doing! I don't understand this!" and Jim said, "that's GREAT!" He got it. He saw this as a Pentecost moment for me. Admitting you don't know is the beginning of an epic journey.

It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work
and when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

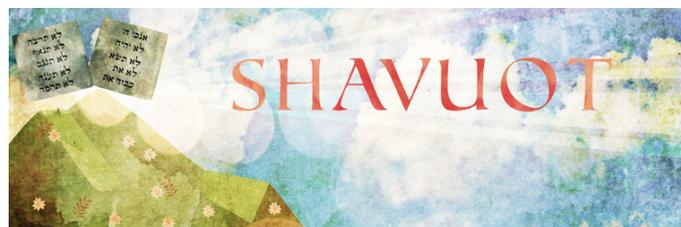
--Wendell Berry

When the crowd says they don't understand and asks "What does this mean?", Peter takes them, of course, into the stream of salvation history... teaching them, explaining to them, the meaning of the events that many of them already knew about, but might not have understood. You see, it wasn't just the supernatural experience of wind and fire that had them baffled, it was the life and death and resurrection of Jesus that amazed them, took them outside of themselves, perplexed them entirely. And Peter frames the events with the meaning that the Holy Spirit had showed him. "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say" (v. 14)! And he takes them back to the prophet, Joel, and Joel's vision that this is how it would one day be... and then he talks about the wonders of Jesus... and then, very carefully, he talks about the death of Jesus as not only the work of the Roman soldiers, but also an even that they were involved and that, by extension, we were involved in. But not only that, here is some of the deepest explanation... God had a plan, a plan to work through Jesus' death into life: "But God raised him from the

dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (v. 24). And then Peter goes on – he ties this back to King David – who also saw the coming of the Messiah – a Messiah whom death could not hold. “God raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (vv. 32-33).

Peter is *teaching* the people... They asked, What does this mean? And Peter is teaching them – Peter is teaching them what the events mean. Jesus himself said, at the end of Matthew 28, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and HS, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded...* and truly, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). The Spirit has come, and with the Spirit, comes the teaching.

I believe that it is no accident that the Spirit came in this way on Pentecost. Before Pentecost was a Christian celebration of the outpouring of the Spirit, it was (and still is) a Jewish festival (as I mentioned earlier) called the Festival of Weeks or *Shavuot*—a time, 50 days after Passover, when the Jews celebrated the giving of the Law of God on Mt. Sinai.



Passover, in Jewish celebration, was Israel’s celebration of their being rescued and delivered from their slavery in Egypt, and Shavuot was a time – 7 weeks and one day later – when they celebrated their becoming a nation committed to serving God in the ways that he commanded... So also, now, our celebration of Jesus’ conquering death on Holy Weekend, and then the celebration, 7 weeks and one day later of the coming of the Holy Spirit, who came to teach us and to lead us in the way of God!

So, there are times when we can rest in our unknowing because there are some things that we just can’t know or fully comprehend... *and* there are times when our bafflement and perplexity and amazement should lead us to ask, What does this mean?! I don’t get it! And the

coaches and teachers among us will say, “YES! Exactly! This is the perfect place to be - - - on the verge of pursuing the learning that you need to follow God!”

Peter concludes his sermon in verse 36: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” Once the people gathered there had heard the sermon from Peter, we find a word that occurs only once in the New Testament – right here (v. 37). The word is *katanusso*... When the people heard all that Peter had taught them, they were *katanusso* – cut to the heart... they were pierced thoroughly, agitated violently, pained in their mind...



When the people heard that they bore responsibility for the death of the Messiah and that the Spirit of God was now being poured out on all people, they were cut to the heart. The Spirit had worked through their ignorance and apathy – the Spirit had pierced what might of have been an “I don’t know and I don’t care” attitude with a “Now we know. And we care” attitude. And they asked another question: “Brothers, what shall we do” (v. 37)?

And now we know that the Spirit is really at work through the teaching of Peter... because it’s not just knowledge that the Spirit teaches us... the knowledge we receive leads to a change in behaviour. Brothers, they asked, What shall we *do*?

Someone very close to me recently shared with me that she didn’t know how to feel close to God. How to worship God. How to spend time with God. What am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do? I *want* to worship God. I *want* to live my life for God. I just don’t know how. And it was another Pentecost, YES! Moment... You don’t know what to do? Yes! You don’t know how to do it? Yes! It may be that when we don’t know what to do, we’ve come to our real work... and when we don’t know which way to go, we’ve begun our real journey. Let’s do this! Let’s learn together... The best part is, you *care*! You *want* to know how! And this is beautiful to God... this desire.

What shall we do?

Peter's answer to this question is clear. Repent. Be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Doug Bratt: "The Greek word for "repent" is *metaneo*, which refers to not only a changed mind about something, but also changed behavior. In other words, Peter seems to invite his audience to adopt a new perspective on Jesus' death and resurrection that, in turn, produces the new behavior that is faithful obedience."¹

Sometimes, before we make a big life change – before we are able to take a step into a new commitment to obedience that comes from the new perspective we've been given, we need to imagine ourselves in the obedience...



Doing the thing. 'Imagine' literally means to 'make an image.' Make an image, a picture, a mental model in your mind of what it might look like for you to obey God's commands. What would it look like to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength by loving your neighbour as yourself? Dream a dream! Imagine what it looks like? Who are the players? Who is in the picture with you? What environment are you in? What resources do you have at your fingertips? What stories are you telling?

This life will be a life that you will never live alone... because you will have the gift of the Holy Spirit... teaching you, leading you, guiding you, strengthening you. And you will have the body of believers, because this promise of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit is never just for one person. This promise is for you! This promise is for your children! This promise is for all who are far off! This promise is for all whom the Lord our God will call!

¹ http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-3a/?type=old_testament_lectionary



What does this mean? Let's learn together!

What shall we do? Let's figure it out together!