

The Rebirth of the Church
Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21
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Heather Leslie Hammer

A little girl of 19 months got a terrible fever; it may have been scarlet fever or meningitis. When she recovered, she had no vision and no hearing. Her world was completely dark and silent. She became wild and unruly, screaming, kicking and scratching when she was frustrated by the imprisonment of her peculiar and terrifying world. This little girl's name was Helen Keller.

When Helen was a little older, her teacher, Ann Sullivan, spelled a word into her hand when she gave Helen a doll. Then one time when Anne spilled water on Helen's hand and spelled out the word "water" into her palm, Helen suddenly got the connection: these letters, w-a-t-e-r, gave a name to what she was feeling—water! Helen Keller explained later: "The mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful, cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, joy, set it free!" The discovery of language gave Helen a rebirth.

Helen Keller had discovered language, and with her brilliant mind, she went on to graduate from Radcliffe College and speak around the world, and write books translated into more than 50 languages.

Language gives access to so much—to communication and relationship in the world! It's hard to imagine being without it. Today we see the instant spread of news and information around the world on the Internet.

In biblical times, most people couldn't read, and, of course, there were no computers, nor even telephones. Communication relied on word of mouth—and, even more than that, language has always depended on the passion to speak.

So, after Jesus died, perhaps about 120 people were gathered together in Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival of Weeks—it was about in the year 33 at the end of what we now call the month of May, 7 weeks after Passover, for Pentecost means 50 days. Now, many years before, the prophet Joel had said, that God promised, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people" (Joel 2:28). And only shortly before this gathering, Jesus had also promised that the Spirit would come to his followers. And so they were probably waiting prayerfully. And because it was Festival time, there were thousands of people gathered in Jerusalem. What a perfect time for the Spirit of God to come down and give the disciples foreign languages so that they could speak with everyone assembled in this multi-cultural throng! All these pilgrims from everywhere (Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, Pamphylia....!) came running and recognized their own languages being spoken by a motley crew of Galileans! "What are they, drunk?" the people ask. But Peter says, "Come on! It's only 9:00 in the morning!" Something bigger is happening—something beyond comprehension—something beyond human capacity.

It was the Spirit of God! And this spirit, this Holy Spirit, empowered the people, and we say the church was born! And in the Book of Acts, the writer goes on to tell us that Peter preached the good news of salvation, and that day 3000 were baptized. And these 3000 joined the fellowship and broke bread together and said prayers, and they shared what they had with one another.

The church was born! People communicating with each other across barriers of language and culture! People being so moved by the Spirit of God, that they lived differently. They went out and ministered to people in need, and they were willing to die for their faith.

What if the Holy Spirit were to sweep through here right now and ignite a fire in each person present! What if our lives would be so changed that our faith became more important to us than anything—such that we would talk about it, and live it out in acts of kindness and charity. And others would want to be like us—filled with the Spirit.

Many books have been written and sermons preached about how the mainline church is dying. I don't want to go there...we have a vibrant, loving community here! We're not dying! But are we growing? We were growing in attendance from January through Easter, averaging 73 in worship, but now we're back to more like 56 or so in attendance each week. How many of you would like to see our church grow? How many of you would like to see our attendance double?—Well, you know how we can do that? We can double our attendance if each person here brings a friend next week. That's what it takes—people on fire with the spirit, enabled by God to speak about our faith.—It doesn't have to be a lot of proselytizing language; it can be genuine comments like, "This church means everything to me. I think you'd like it." or "I find my week is happier if I've been to church. Will you come with me?" or "Because you are my friend, I want you to meet some of my other friends."

I don't want to talk about the church dying, but I do want to talk about its need to be reborn.

It is through witnessing that new people come to know God through Christ. We've had witnesses in worship recently: Helen spoke about COTS, and how she is helping a family that lacks resources; Louise told about her journey of faith, and I hope someone listening with little faith might have been strengthened that day; and Leila spoke about coming from the Philippines and finding a church in a new country. New members promise to commit their time, talent, gifts, service, and witness. Jesus said before he died, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). You! You shall be Christ's witnesses!

Loren Mead has written a book, widely read, *The Once and Future Church* (1991). Mead has updated this book with a follow-up book, *Five Challenges for the Once and Future Church* (2001). These five challenges are ones to discuss here at St. John's. I hope we'll have some on-going conversation on these challenges as we form a vision for our church.

The first challenge is to empower the laity to lead the church. You are already strong in this area. Last year you had only substitute or interim pastors and church went on! You have lay preachers and an administrative assistant who are very capable of running the church. You have dedicated volunteers mowing the lawn, serving on committees, leading adult education classes, and feeding the hungry in the community. I cannot complain about people not serving—we just need more people and we could do more.

The second challenge is to examine our structure as a denomination and as a local church. Are there new ways we might organize ourselves, raise money, spread the word? Our Conference is undergoing a complete restructuring, with fewer districts and a change in how we allocate funds and organize committee work. You'll be hearing about this, and we may want to look at how we organize ourselves accordingly at the local level. Becky Jackson and I attended a workshop on Friday about putting the church on FaceBook and having a completely electronic newsletter. This is the future church!

The third challenge is to develop a passionate spirituality. I hope we can do that in worship and in small groups. We need places to talk to one another about how God is working in our lives. People are hungry for relationship with something beyond ourselves—relationship that matters.

The fourth challenge is to nurture the world's need for community. Churches provide community in ways that no other organization seems to be able to do. Our church is a community; those who come every week feel connected. The church can respond to a need of others for community who don't have that connection; for example we might offer a support group for people who have a family member with addiction or mental illness. We can support families, marriages, people who are recently divorced, or recently widowed, or people who are gay—any group of people needing connection. Having small groups where a new person can fit right in and feel included is an important way we can offer community.

The fifth challenge is to become an apostolic people, a people sent out in Jesus' name. We are all disciples, called by God to share our gifts, called by God to serve one another. The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is belief in the future church!

What do you think, can these bones live? Can these dry bones live? Ezekiel says: "Thus says the Lord God to these bones [to the church in need of new life]: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord....O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live (Ezekiel 37:5-6, 14).

Do you know the movie, "Pay it Forward?" A 12-year-old boy in Las Vegas, named Trevor is given an assignment to complete for his social studies class. His task is to come up with a plan that will change the world through direct action. On his way home from school later

that day, Trevor notices a homeless man and decides to make a difference in his life. Trevor comes up with the plan to "pay it forward" by doing a good deed for three people who must in turn each do good deeds for three other people. That's how the spirit of love works. You give it away! It spreads out! Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches."

Helen Keller "paid it forward" by speaking through an interpreter and writing, and campaigning tirelessly to change the poor living conditions of blind people, who at that time were usually badly educated and living in asylums. Her endeavors were a major factor in changing these conditions, connecting people with disabilities into the mainstream of life with meaning.

We can pay it forward. We can witness to our faith. We can use language to invite others to know God. We can allow God's spirit to be reborn in us, and then we can pay it forward—we can give it away. What do you think, can these bones live? If you think so, say "Amen!"