

“Imagine”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17,25-27

They were surprised and amazed, saying,

“Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?

How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?

...[W]e hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”

They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other,

“What does this mean?”

Acts 2:7-8, 11^b-12

Let us pray... O God,

What does this mean for us? What does Pentecost mean for us?

How are we still connected to the vision of your Kingdom from long ago?

Inspire our imaginations for what is yet to be – and already is.

Amen

Pentecost Sunday is the beginning of the longest season of the Christian year
from now to November.

For six months, our lessons will tell the stories of the Kingdom –
Jesus’ healing, teaching, and wonderworking miracles.

The event of Pentecost signifies the advent of the Kingdom,
the coming of the Kingdom as a conscious, spiritual reality.

What takes place at Pentecost stands in direct contrast with the story in Genesis
about the Tower of Babel – as an amazing reversal of that story.

The narrative of the Tower of Babel tells about some people of ancient times
who wanted to build a structure so high, that they would be on God’s level.

God rewards their arrogance by giving each one of them their own language,
which disrupts their work and creates confusion, so they can’t work together
and so, the Tower is never completed.

There are real structures like this in the Middle East called ziggurats –
towers constructed with a path that spirals upward until it reaches the summit.

Whether or not such a Tower of Babel actually existed or
whether or not this serves as an explanation

for the diversity of human languages,

should not be as important to us as to ask, “Why is this story in the Bible?”

The Tower of Babel is an example of the negligent misuse of technology
as well as disrespect for the powers of nature and the power of God
which underlies those powers.

However, Pentecost turns that around with an awe-inspiring event as the disciples
are enabled to speak and be understood in the various languages of everyone
present – and with the Apostle Peter’s help, getting everybody on
the same page... and wouldn’t that be nice these days?

Willard, p.2

Did such an event actually happen?

Again, we can get caught up in asking the wrong question
when what we really want to know is:

“What does this mean?” as we echo those witnesses to the first Pentecost.

We are constantly exposed to all kinds of media imagery and messages
that are fragmented, unfolding, mysterious, amazing, slanderous,
breaking news, or just bald-face lies.

It seems like anything that can be imagined is being put out there
with no regard for verification.

We not only have to be discerning about what we take in,
but also what we repeat and put out there, too...

Imagination can be part of the problem in exaggerating fears and anger,
but imagination is also an ally, serving to create possibilities of hope
despite outward circumstances.

By the way, of all the places where one could go to have their imagination rekindled,
for me it was at a psychiatric hospital – oh, where I *worked* for 4 ½ years!

During my first week on the job as an ‘Assistant Supervisor for Recreation’
at Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital in NJ,
I was filled with apprehension.

I would be working with adult psychiatric patients who were relatively
high-functioning, but who could act out in risky ways.

A couple of days into the job. I had arrived early and
was waiting in the hallway for the office to open,
when one of the occupational therapists named Lana showed up.

Lana was wearing a knee-length winter coat of many colors
and she was a very cheerful and kind person; She said to me,
“It takes about 6 months to find the magic of this place...”

She was right, and my time there was a strange and beautiful journey...

I worked as a recreation therapist and used art, games, and leisure walks
to engage the patients, taking them seriously
as human beings on a hard journey.

That place brought out every fearful, neurotic notion I ever had,
yet at the same time, I saw what it was like
for people who really had a problem of mental illness –
life in the raw untroubled by the usual customs of cleanliness and civility.

One particular discovery I learned was
how a person’s mind can be broken like an arm, but who we are –
a person’s personality, their spirit, remains untouched within.

Willard, p.3

It was right before I was to finally leave that job at the psych hospital,
when one of the patients named Bennie –
who never participated in any of my programs,
asked me to take her out for a smoke.

Bennie was a relatively tall woman, always in motion
with kind of a wild look in her eyes.

She would say to me,

“Drew, big as you is, what’re you afraid of?”

I’m thinking, “You, Bennie.”

She was always putting things in her mouth
and I’d say, “Bennie! Take that out of your mouth!”
and she would go, “OK!”

So as I said, she asked me to take her out for a smoke –
which she had never asked of me before.

It was raining like one of those apocalyptic rains, pouring down in sheets,
and we sat in plastic white chairs under a corrugated awning
while I lit up her cigarette.

Then, Bennie started to talk...

I don’t recall what it was she said, but I can tell you how I felt –
privileged to witness her speak from her heart.

She was who she was – lucid and rational in a way I’d never heard her speak before...

I am reminded of a play called, “The Boys Next Door” – about a young man who
takes a job as caretaker at a group home for four mentally challenged men.
Life could be very frustrating for this caretaker as he learns
how to work with these disabled adults.

During a very dramatic scene in this play,
one of these men, Lucien P. Singer speaks in an aside to the audience:

*I stand before you a middle-aged man in an uncomfortable suit,
a man whose capacity for rational thought is somewhere between
a five-year-old and an oyster...*

*I am retarded. I am damaged. I am sick inside from so many years of confusion,
utter and profound confusion.*

*I am mystified by faucets and radios and elevators and newspapers
and popular songs.*

*I cannot always remember the names of my parents.
But I will not go away.*

And I will not wither because the cage is too small.

I am here to remind the species... of... the species.

Willard, p.4

I am Lucien Percival Singer.

*And with[?] me, with[?] my shattered crippled brain,
you will never again be frightened by what you might have become.
Or indeed, by what your future might make you.*

Bennie could have said those things – indeed, that is what her words actually meant to me – a reaffirmation of what it means to be human and live a fulfilled life.

That was one of many experiences at Greystone Park, both wonderful and terrible that were part of my spiritual education.

Despite such limitations as mental illness, there is greatness in human beings and though there is no such thing as perfection,
we can come pretty close as we seek to achieve some great task.

When we as people put aside the insanity of our differences and use our imaginations to work together, we can do just about anything – like go to the Moon.

This past week I had the privilege to visit the Kennedy Space Center where they are getting ready to send a space ship to the planet Mars. It will be the most powerful rocket ever made combining the old Saturn V that took Apollo astronauts to the Moon with the booster rockets of the shuttle.

Unfortunately, this prototype rocket has the most unimaginative name: the Space Launch System. Give me a break! Why not the Milky Way Express? Or the Millennium Falcon? Or Mars Tours Unlimited?

Right now, they got engineers running everything, so they really need a poet. Yet the visitor center itself showed some of the “Imagineering” you would expect from Disney.

Rocket systems from the past like Redstone, Titan, and Atlas were all on display like a futuristic space port.

Music worthy of John Williams was playing everywhere.

There was the requisite souvenir shops and fast food eateries, but also elaborate theatres and displays as well as the Atlantis shuttle, and a hangar long enough to contain a Saturn V, Apollo spacecraft, and the LEM lunar module.

It was fabulous to see and it was clear the focus was on inspiring young people, the next generation for planning, preparing, and making the trip to Mars itself in 2030...

There was such optimism – especially from our bus tour guide who was filled with enthusiasm as she described the buildings and structures, their function and history.

Willard, p.5

She was filled with pride that her brother worked at the Space Center
as an engineer, and spoke of her lifelong excitement about NASA –
the National Aeronautics & Space Administration, our Space Program.
I asked her if there was any acknowledgment of spirituality
amidst all this science – and her face kind of lit up
as she answered yes, there was,
and she said that many of the NASA scientists believe in God.
She said this was especially so, due to the more that was learned as the deeper we go.

Perhaps the highpoint for me was to see a video
of the first Moon landing and how perilous that last 90 seconds had been.
Neil Armstrong realized their lunar module was coming in too fast
as they passed their checkpoints too early!
He had to ignore what the computer was telling him
and there was no time to consult with Houston Control.
He landed it manually with only seconds of fuel to spare –
a human being setting aside technology to listen to what he knew
within himself to be the right way to go...

That made me so proud to see this – we did that!
We Americans did that, but not just for us.
For all our faults as a society and for too often, the way things seem so confusing,
yet we did something great, and not just for us as Americans,
but for all the people on this planet Earth we call home.
There was a simple optimism there
with that Hispanic tour guide's love for the Space Program,
with an Arab child who knew all about a certain space craft maneuver,
with a Japanese aeronautics engineer who was there with his wife
and two little children,
with a Euro-American man who'd been a technician on John Glenn's last flight.
We had been told that there were thousands of 'space spinoffs' –
not just Tang breakfast drink and Space Blankets, but all kinds of advances in
medical, environmental, and communication technologies.
In fact, we were told that NASA by design cannot benefit from any of its discoveries.
It is the only organization of the United States with a charter
to benefit all humankind.

Alexis de Tocqueville of France visited the United States in the 1830s and said this:
*America is great because America is good,
and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.*
There was a quote on a display wall by a Shuttle engineer named Michael Mitchell:
"The adventure has only begun. The space shuttle program personifies
what a great people can do, and provides a glimpse of the greatness
that lies ahead."

Willard, p.6

Let me bring this back down to Earth...

I told you about two remarkable human beings who prevailed
in the midst of challenging circumstances.

One had to deal with the confusion in her own head to speak her truth,
and the other had to turn off the computer to listen to the truth within.

Both these people are emblematic to me of human greatness
and who are significant members of our society – and its potential.

We are living in the midst of a very challenging era of competing realities
that are rarely accurate.

Yet as Christians living in American society, we are part of a viable alternative
to the domination and domestication of these competing realities.

Walter Brueggeman, a contemporary UCC theologian and author,
put forth this thesis in his book, The Prophetic Imagination:

*The task of prophetic ministry is to
nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception
alternative to [that] of the dominant culture around us.*

He says this awareness began with Moses leading the Hebrew people
to make a ‘radical break with the social reality of Pharaoh’s Egypt’
by debunking the gods of Egypt through
‘the freedom of God’ who acts independently of any human powers.

Brueggeman said that ‘Israel’ did not evolve from some earlier culture,
but emerged as a new ‘social community’ with its own structure and rules.

We are part of that alternative, emerging culture that values people like Bennie
as no less than Neil Armstrong as being part of that vision
of a beloved community that celebrates our common humanity.

What does that look like for us as the UCC at The Villages?

We are a progressive church in the midst of a conservative community
and that means we are ONA of LGBT people in their struggle for dignity.

We are a congregation that has a strong Christology that is not afraid
to engage in interfaith dialogue with our Jewish and Muslim allies.

We are a church that seeks to feed and clothe those in need through
support of Seeds of Hope, local food pantry, and national UCC programs.

We are a church that advocates for Civil Rights and Equal Rights,
and we are a church that inspires young people
through our Creative Arts afterschool program.

As Betty McLeod said a while ago, ‘We are a small church with a big heart.’

Willard, p.7

The season of Pentecost is about that continuing human adventure we are part of.

It is a story that began as an alternative to the arrogance of the Tower of Babel
and the impotence of the Egyptian gods.

Pentecost is about finding greatness even in human brokenness,
finding greatness as we step out of the insulation of things
and look to the heavens.

Pentecost is answering the call of the great Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit of Jesus
to join in on a journey of discovery that begins with imagining
life on Planet Earth as a world that can yet be –
even the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen

Our lesson today from Acts 2:1-21 is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to them as a Counselor to remind them what Jesus had said and to continue to teach them...

- ¹When Pentecost Day arrived,
they were all together in one place.
- ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting.
- ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them.
- ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.
- ⁵ There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.
- ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages.
- ⁷ They were surprised and amazed, saying,
“Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?”
- ⁸ How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?
- ⁹ Parthians, Medes [Meeds], and Elamites;
as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea,
and Cappadocia [Kappa- doch’-ee-a], Pontus and Asia,
- ¹⁰ Phrygia [Free’-jah] and Pamphylia [Pam-fill’-ee-ya], Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene;
and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism),
- ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs –
we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”
- ¹² They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other,
“What does this mean?”
- ¹³ Others jeered at them, saying,
“They’re full of new wine!”
- ¹⁴ Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared,
“Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem!
Know this! Listen carefully to my words!
- ¹⁵ These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect;
after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning!

¹⁶ Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

- ¹⁷ *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.*
- ¹⁸ *Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*
- ¹⁹ *I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.*
- ²⁰ *The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.*
- ²¹ *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 14:8-17,25-27

⁸ Philip said to him,

“Lord, show us the [Abba] Father, and we shall be satisfied.”

⁹ Jesus said to him,

“Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?

[The one] who has seen me has seen the [Abba] Father; how can you say,

‘Show us the [Abba] Father’?

¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the [Abba] and the [Abba] in me?

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority;

but the [Abba] who dwells in me does his works.

¹¹ Believe me that I am in the [Abba] Father and the [Abba] in me;

or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.

¹² “Truly, truly, I say to you, [those] who [believe] in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will [they] do, because I go to the [Abba].

¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it,

that the [Abba] may be glorified in the Son;

¹⁴ if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.

¹⁵ “If you love me,

you will keep my commandments.

¹⁶ And I will pray the [Abba] Father, and [the Abba] will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever,

¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees... nor knows [this one];

you know [this one], for [the Spirit] dwells with you, and will be in you.