

Sermon – “Sure Foundation”

Pentecost and Founders Sunday, May 23, 2021

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:1-8, 11-18, Romans 8:22-27

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Our first scripture reading is Acts 2:1-8, 11-18. This is Luke’s account of what took place at the Pentecost festival fifty days following the Passover, which marked the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those gathered hear the words of the disciples in their own dialect and experience God’s presence and sure foundation in the wind and the fire of the Holy Spirit. Hear now God’s holy word.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

Pause for vs. 17-18 spoken in Korean, Spanish, French, Japanese and German

...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. Amen.

As much as our first reading, Acts 2, dramatically depicts the coming of the Spirit as an event that breaks down the barriers created by the pluralism of human languages giving new speech through which the gospel may be heard, our second reading, Romans 8:22-27, affirms the spirit’s speech on our behalf, breathing sighs, when words are inadequate to convey what is on our hearts. Hear now, God’s holy word.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Sure Foundation”

The text: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Romans 8:26*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, today we give thanks for the abundance of your Spirit and for the richness of our history. Continue to enliven, sustain, and pray for us, beloved Advocate, every step of the journey we travel. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Two years before Westminster called me to be your 18th Senior Minister and I was given the privilege of adding my photo to those of my predecessors on the Ministers Wall, my understanding of the Spirit’s sure foundation in my life was deepened, broadened, dug out, and excavated.

It was the summer of 2011. I had received a series of rejections from other large congregations to which I applied to be their senior minister, two of my closest mentors in the ministry died within weeks of one another, and I was being told by the interim presbytery exec that I had set my goals too high for my next call. I was exhausted, discouraged and although the Sabbatical I received was a welcome pause, it also meant a lot of work planning, traveling, and writing.

During the second phase of my time away while in Scotland following a two-week medical mission along the Amazon River valley with Peter and Paul where live a diversity of primitive cultures and languages, I began to take deep breaths, rather vocal sighs which came spontaneously and routinely providing a relief, a respite that is difficult for me to explain. My sister, Becky, who accompanied me for part of these travels will attest to these sighs for which from time to time she scolded me as only an older sister can. I would blithely comment that I was praying.

Then three weeks later after Becky had departed and Peter and Paul joined me again, we were in Geneva, Switzerland touring Temple of the Madeleine where John Calvin, John Knox and Karl Barth had all preached. On the way out, I picked up a piece of paper from a basket with quotes and Bible verses for visitors to take. As we walked down the street I read the quote I selected. It was from Brother Roger Schutz, founder of the Taize worship community which we visited the prior week. He wrote, “Beloved, know that your sighs are prayers to God” with a reference to Romans 8:26.

The name of the nerve providing exclusive motor control for the diaphragm, which empowers us to sigh and to breathe originates from *phrenos*, the Greek word for mind and spirit. Life begins with our first breath, and when we breathe our last breath, our spirit departs.

I continue to sigh, not as deeply as I was sighing that summer, and when my 94-year old mother sighs, I remind her that she, too, is praying...that the Spirit who knows the depth of our pain and the height of our joy, the spirit who understands our fears when we cannot catch our breath, and who recognizes our hesitancy to take the mask off even when we know intellectually we are protected by the vaccine, that spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes with sighs too deep for words, praying on our behalf.

This, my friends, is the sure foundation we celebrate this Pentecost and 186th Founders' Day. We gather on this momentous occasion to honor our past and to imagine our future as we give thanks for the outpouring of God's Spirit upon each generation.

In the same way that a sure foundation of a building needs a give and take and the ability to breath within the structure, what makes the foundation of our faith sure is that we have a God who is willing to give and take and whose breath, in Hebrew, *ruah*, swept over the face of the waters creating the world. God's spirit gives order to the universe and gives life and breath to each of us.

Not only do we belong to the Creator God who breathes life into this world, we have a God who was willing to join us in the give and take of life, to breath the same air we breathe, and to take his last breath on the cross in an act of reconciliation.

When the followers of Christ found themselves separated from their mentor after his death, resurrection, and ascension, with sighs too deep for words, once again God breathed life into the community of believers with the rush of a wind.

And we learned that the sure foundation of Christ's church is the give and take of people who listen to one another, who are willing to tear down walls of hostility and prejudice, and who are empowered to build up communities who welcome men and women, old and young, slave and free, from different cultures and races, who share leadership, who give voice to the injustices within society, and who honor each person's right to breathe.

On this Founders' Sunday, we give thanks for faithful abolitionists who were a part of our beginning. God's spirit created a sure foundation, a structure with integrity. What a joy it is to continue the good work begun in that time and place through service and mission here and today, through listening to and breathing with one another and our neighbors.

Today, we celebrate the continuing presence of God's Spirit in our midst, who gives us the speech to proclaim the good news and who intercedes with sighs too deep for words, sustaining all with a sure foundation. Amen.