

Sermon – “Unspeakable Grace”  
Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2014  
Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-6, 12-18  
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Our scripture reading is Acts 2:1-6, 12-18. 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 in a life changing way. Hear now the word of God.

*1 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. 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.*

The title of the sermon: “Unspeakable Grace”

The text: *I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh...* Acts 2:17a

Let us pray: Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for your life-giving spirit who empowers us to speak with tenderness and openness. As we reflect on the mystery and wonder of your presence in our lives, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

A decade ago Peter, Paul and I joined my parents on a journey to the Netherlands to explore the homeland of my mother’s family. One of the highlights of the trip was seeing the windmills throughout the countryside.

There’s an old saying by Voltaire that “God created the world and the Dutch created the Netherlands.” In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a Dutchman by the name of Jan Leegwater invented a system that used windmills to drain a lake after a ring canal had been constructed around it. This meant more and more of the land covered by water could be reclaimed by the Dutch who found a way to use the wind, a major source of energy to create and expand their homeland. The dikes that held the waters back and kept their country above the water were all maintained by windmills.

The canals that flow through the city of Amsterdam with the lovely, colorful, tall row houses give this city of water its character. The story of the little boy who saved his city by putting his finger in the hole in the dyke reveals a very real concern for the Dutch. Their wooden shoes, which seem unpractical to us, were a necessity in their world surrounded by water.

One of the results of this water is the beautiful flowers, particularly tulips for which the Dutch are known. Another part of their culture is the blue and white dishes the Dutch first created in the city of Delf. These were replicas of what they had brought back from China during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when they had the largest sailing fleet in Europe, again resourcefully using the energy of the wind.

As I thought about the power of the wind being creatively transformed by the windmill and the tall sails on a ship, I remembered that wind is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. It occurred to me how God's presence and love can be a powerful resource and advocate when it is transformed in creative and constructive ways within the faith community.

On this Pentecost Sunday we remember the extraordinary experience of those who gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, fifty days following Easter morning; and how God's spirit lived and moved among them, in a new way, like a mighty wind, empowering them with words that were not their own and an understanding that transcended language and culture.

They knew as they watched the tongues of fire, even as Moses knew when he stood before the burning bush, that they were on Holy Ground, that God was in their midst creating something new...something unspeakable.

This past Friday the world commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-day. On June 6, 1944, our country joined several nations transcending language and culture to fight the evil of Nazi Germany. More than 160,000 Allied troops landed along a 50-mile stretch of heavily-fortified coastline on the beaches of Normandy, France. 5,000 Ships and 13,000 aircraft supported the D-Day invasion, and by day's end, the Allies gained a foot-hold in Continental Europe. The cost in lives was high. More than 9,000 Allied Soldiers were killed or wounded, but their sacrifice allowed more than 100,000 Soldiers to begin the slow, hard slog across Europe, to defeat Adolf Hitler's crack troops.

The eve of June 6 this past week I attended Theatre-in-the-Park to watch one of our 2014 confirmands, Emma Shafer, play Anne in "The Diary of Anne Frank." Anne and her family were hiding in Amsterdam the day of the invasion and had great hope their unspeakable ordeal would come to an end, although they were mindful that it would take many months for the troops to reach the Netherlands. Tragically Anne died on March 12, 1945, a few days before the liberation of Auschwitz Concentration Camp where she was held captive...an unspeakable loss and yet, when we consider the impact of the written words of this courageous, articulate young woman, we are grateful that her spirit lives on through memory and in the gifted actors, like Emma, who tell her poignant and inspiring story.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are grateful that we live in a world where there is a greater respect and understanding among people of faith...and (in the words of Henry Sloane Coffin, a famous Presbyterian minister who served as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church at the time of the Normandy invasion) an acknowledgement that *God is beyond the grasp of our highest thought, but within the reach of our frailest trust.* Today we continue to celebrate the spirit of

unspeakable grace that lives and moves among us in acts of compassion, advocacy and liberation moving beyond language and culture.

I first heard the phrase “unspeakable grace” at the memorial service of my mentor and advocate, the Reverend Dr. Fred Cornell who was Pastor/Head of staff at the First United Presbyterian Church in Belleville, Illinois where I received my first call. Fred went into the ministry following his service in World War II. He took me under his wing and taught me what it means to be a pastor and advocate. The benediction that you often hear me speak, *Go out into the world in peace, have courage...* I received from Fred.

At Fred’s memorial service, his son John sang the song “Beginningless Day.” The paradox filled words within this song speaks to the worldview John learned from his father, a man of deep faith and a large spirit.

*We stand in the placeless pavilion, the nameless gymnasium of unspeakable grace.  
Ancient sunrise, beginningless day.*

*The heart hears in stillness the truth only silence can say. Ancient sunrise, beginningless day.  
We move through the blossoming meadowland, Everywhere home in this infinite space.  
Ancient sunrise, beginningless day.*

In the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers receive a strength, which nurtures and sustains us in this infinite space. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers receive courage, which empowers us to advocate for the poor, to liberate the captives and to speak on behalf of those whose voices have been long silenced.

May we be people who are empowered by God’s spirit, which surrounds us like the mummer of the dove’s song and the rush of the wind. May we creatively and constructively resource God’s spirit moving beyond language and culture. And may we never stop being in awe of the Holy Trinity, whose name is too holy to speak, whose being is beyond our understanding and whose presence is within our reach. Amen.