

Sermon for Sunday, June 9, 2019 - "Gifts to Give Away"

The Day of Pentecost - Last Sunday of Easter
June 9, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Apparently, God gives interesting birthday gifts. Pentecost is often considered the birthday of the church, the day the church was born.

And on Pentecost, God gave an amazing gift to the first followers of Jesus - the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the gift wasn't for them - it was for other people.

The Holy Spirit came upon the first followers of Jesus and allowed them to speak in different languages so that people from all over the world could hear about God in their own native language.

This was a huge gift to all those other people for two key reasons.

For one thing, just think about what it's like to hear your own native language when you're far from home, especially in a place where many don't speak your language. Everything takes more work. It's hard to read signs, get food, and make your way around much less connect with other people. When your ears are filled with sounds you don't understand or sounds you've had to work hard to learn, you always feel a bit like an outsider. When you hear someone speaking your own language, it's such a gift. It feels like home.

This happened to me once when friends and I were on a bus in Southern Zimbabwe. The bus entered into the country of South Africa and we didn't think we were supposed to be in South Africa. Were we on the right bus? We tried asking the people around us, but they didn't speak English or Shona, the official language that we were working to learn. I was getting a little nervous. Then we came to a bus stop where people were waiting to board, and through the open window we could hear two men speaking English in an Australian accent.

As soon as I heard their words, my body started to relax. Once they told us we were on the right bus I felt even better. But, just hearing my own language helped me breathe more easily and feel less alone. I see that same sense of relief on the faces of our immigrant neighbors in Decorah when someone speaks to them in Spanish. It's such a gift to hear people speaking in your own native language. It makes you feel welcome and at home.

That's how the other people gathered on the Day of Pentecost must have felt when they heard the followers of Jesus speaking in their own languages. It must have felt like home. But it wasn't just hearing their own native tongue that was a gift. It's also what was said. They got to hear that God's Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, that all people can call on Jesus and be saved, that God is focused on all people.

These folks had been living as outsiders in Jerusalem, surrounded by a language not their own.

They were outsiders to the Jesus movement. But through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they were drawn into the new thing God is up to in Jesus - God's work to save, recreate and renew the whole world.

God gave the Holy Spirit to Jesus' followers expressly for outsiders so that the outsiders could be assured that they belong to God, have a home in God, and are important to God.

The gift God gave the day the church was born was for other people. From the beginning, woven into its DNA, the church was turned outward. God's gifts were given to the church in order to serve those outside the church.

This is how God works still today. God gives us such amazing gifts, but we're supposed to give these gifts away. We're to use them to help other people know they belong to God, have a home in God, and are important to God.

Good Shepherd, I love what we are doing by supporting people preparing for public ministry. We're investing in these people not for our own sakes but for the sake of the larger church and God's world. Amalia, Angie, Daniel, Joseph, Menzi and Nathan are such gifts from God to us. We have such joy in seeing their leadership and faithfulness and in knowing we are part of their journeys. Yet, we don't get to keep these people here with us. We get to bless and release them to share their gifts with others in Elkader and Strawberry Point, La Crosse, Dubuque, Duluth, St. Paul, and Gackle.

I also love how we are doing that with this building that we have been given. This building is a wonderful gift to this congregation. From the beginning this congregation has used its building for others - that's part of the congregation's DNA. The most striking example of this was when the building and the annex were used as a center for Southeast Asian refugee resettlement work and language classes.

Yet still today, this building is used by Kinderhaus preschool, Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, Friends of Recovery, the Quilts of Valor group, NE IA Path to Citizenship, immigrant language classes, the Decorah Area Faith Coalition, Opportunity Homes, a garden club, a travel club - and those are just the groups that meet here regularly.

This May we again hosted meals for Muslim students who were fasting during Ramadan. One student said to me, "To be so far from home, fasting all day is hard. Yet to know that people are caring for us and tending to the details in order to make us feel so loved and welcome, that means so much."

With all these groups and events and our own growing ministry, there are many days that we run out of space for everyone. The renovations will provide more workable space without expanding our footprint. We're gaining an additional good meeting room. We're reworking the education space to work better for our Sunday School and the Kinderhaus preschool.

Again and again, groups that meet here report how much they value having a safe place to meet. These renovations will make the spaces more private so they feel even safer and more welcoming.

In this process, we're also caring for God's creation by installing a geothermal-based heat pump system.

These renovations *are* expensive. And it is also part of Good Shepherd's DNA to not want to spend too much money on a building so that more can be given away.

Yet, the work we're doing will allow us to better offer the gift of this building to those outside this congregation. It will help us to live out key parts of our mission statement, our commitments to:

- **Welcome all**, offering trust and respect while sharing God's unconditional love.
- **Reach out** to the broader community through service and responsible stewardship of all God's creation.

God has given us such abundance, such gifts. We can use them to nurture a space that says to others: You belong, you are important, there is a place for you here.

God's gifts are given for others.

It's in the DNA of Christ's church and in the DNA of this congregation to look outward and serve those who are outside.

We can do this as we support those preparing for public ministry.

We can do this as we care for the gift of this building and offer it to others.

We can do this in so many ways as a congregation and in our daily lives.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.