

“What Is the Gift?”  
Pentecost B  
Acts 2:1-21

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In Jesus' Name.

When the Spirit of God is unleashed gifts abound. In Genesis 1 the entire creation blooms when the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters and carried God's Word, “Let there be.” God's Spirit-breath carried the Word to the virgin's womb and the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” What gift does the Spirit bring at Pentecost?

My immediate response is courage. Before this the disciples were gathered together, 120 of them, Acts 1:15 tells us. That is when Peter stood up to lead them in choosing a successor for Judas. A week later those 120 are still gathered together in one place when the day of Pentecost arrived. The Spirit swept over them and swept them out into the streets. Just seven weeks prior Peter denied knowing Jesus. Now he stands before the crowd; he is no longer afraid. However, on second thought, if they were afraid they would not be in a crowd of 120. By seven weeks, almost two months, they would have melted away entirely. I think the resurrection bedded down fear. After the resurrection, what was there to be afraid of? They, rather, were gathered in convention, making speeches voting on delegates, praying up a storm, and waiting on God.

If courage is not the Spirit's first Pentecost gift, another possibility is understanding. Those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia understood what the Apostles said. Understanding certainly is a gift. We knew that when we missed our train connection and stood, suitcases in hand, on a train platform in a Polish city. The agent at the information window did not speak English. We listened intently to the PA system, straining our ears for any mention of Krakova, Krakow, our destination.

What is crucial in the understanding is knowing that it is for me. But that is not what happens in our text, at least not at first. They understood the words but said, “What does this mean?” It is like when I listen to my son talk about computers. I understand all of the words. It’s the sentences I have trouble with. As important as it is, understanding is not the Spirit’s first gift.

A pastor friend of mine said the gift is misunderstanding. He entitled his sermon for this Sunday “The Blessing of Being Misunderstood.” It sounds like half the crowd understood the words but not the sentences. The other half concluded the apostles had gotten into the communion wine already at nine in the morning. “Filled with new wine” was the charge. That year’s Beaujolais had just come on the market and they had too much. There can be a blessing in being misunderstood. Hugh Kress is himself an illustration of that. Did you know Mr. Kress was expelled from 7<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation class? It is hard to believe. Our school principal was thrown out of Confirmation class. I hear you can still see the green peas up in the light fixtures of the lunchroom at First Lutheran School in Sharpsburg, PA. He and some of his buddies launched peas from their spoons. The object was to get them into the light fixtures. Hugh was a good shot. Hugh is a gentle, pious, good, and hardworking man. He is a master teacher. But when he was twelve, that was a different story. Being misunderstood is a backhanded blessing. It is a blessing when it attracts the attention of a person who is careful to look beneath the behavior. Such a person has gospel eyes. They do not ignore the behavior. But a person with gospel eyes looks beneath the surface to see the child of God others are ready to write off. The blessing for Hugh was his jr. high school teacher, Mr. Warren Helming. Mr. Helming had gospel eyes. He did not give up on Hugh. He simply would not let him go. “He changed my life,” Hugh said.

During High School Mr. Helming called him up on occasion. Hugh’s first two years of high school were rough. He struggled with Latin and Algebra. I think that is why he is such a

gifted math teacher. Here is how being misunderstood became a gift for decades of children. Hugh can take the high achievers or those who are struggling and patiently, insightfully bring them to the next level. Warren Helming guided Hugh to a Lutheran College. That did not come easily either. The family had no money for college. His father told him he would have to pay his own way. Hugh worked summers in a steel mill. He started at Concordia Bronxville. In one of the first classes, as the professor called the role, he used a nickname for Hugh, a nickname that Hugh made me swear on a stack of Bibles never to reveal. It was a nickname only Warren Helming knew. Mr. Helming called the professor to set this up. Mr. Helming was letting Hugh know he was still with him. It becomes clear why Hugh became a Lutheran school teacher. Being misunderstood turned Hugh into a gift for forty years of teaching ministry and to countless children for whom Hugh is their Warren Helming, patient, looking with Gospel eyes beneath the behavior to the child of God. That gift of being misunderstood will continue as God redefines Hugh's ministry on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association.

However, being misunderstood is only an accidental blessing. It can just as often be a curse. It was not the first gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. There are hints of what the first gift was already at the beginning. "The Spirit of God swept over the face of the deep and God said, 'Let there be,' and there was." In the beginning was the Word and when the time was right the Spirit-breath of God carried the Word to the womb of the virgin and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." At Jesus' inaugural sermon, recorded in Luke 4, he read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has.... sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In Acts, Luke's volume 2, he records the same thing at the beginning of the Apostle's ministry. The Spirit of the Lord came upon them and they proclaimed the good news. The first gift of the Spirit is proclamation. The

gift is not the proclamation of any old words. The Spirit's Pentecost gift is the proclamation of Jesus crucified and raised for our reclamation and for the salvation of the whole world. We know already in Acts 2 the proclamation will break all boundaries of race and nationality.

The front side of the gospel is the word that tells us why we need a crucified and risen Savior, why it is not just a matter of trying harder. This front-end word goes by the name law. The law was Mr. Helming coming up behind Hugh when he was engaged in some transgression or other and giving the hair at the base of his neck a little twist. The law finds us in our hiding places and calls us out so that we might hear the good news and turn to God's mercy. We call that repentance. The Holy Spirit uses proclamation to create faith. In the economy of salvation God counts faith as righteousness. Proclamation thwarts the power of evil. "This world's prince may rage, in fierce war engage. He is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail. One little word subdues him."

Proclamation of this Word creates daughters and sons for God and extends God's kingly rule into a world that has other rulers. Words construct the kingdoms in which we live far more than bricks and mortar. The kingdom in which western culture lives is constructed by some variation of these words: "I am the master of my destiny, the captain of my soul."<sup>1</sup> We are self-made men and women who worship our creator. If we are self made that means we worship ourselves. If this is so, our destiny is the grave period.

Now consider the domain created by the proclamation, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Better than that he has died, is risen, and is coming again for us and God's new creation. We were made citizens by baptism. We took the pledge of allegiance again this morning in the creed. Soon we will eat the cuisine of the kingdom, at least an appetizer of it.

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<sup>1</sup> William Ernest Henley, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 2002), 594.

The weight of destiny does not press on our shoulders. Christ bore all that weight at his cross and rose as the first born of God's new creation. He is master of our destinies and captain of our souls?

Proclamation is the foundation upon which Grace School is built. It is at the center of Hugh Kress's teaching ministry. By proclamation we form citizens for God's kingdom and send them out to extend God's kingly rule in the course of every day life. Like Mr. Helming we too are given gospel eyes to see beneath the surface to the wonders of God at work.