

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost, Series B, June 4, 2017

Theme: That was a good sermon!

I. When the Spirit cut to your heart

II. When the Spirit moved your faith

INJ Sometimes, on the way out of church, a person will tell me, “Good sermon, Pastor.” Now, I could take that comment in a good way. Did you see Jesus clearly that day? Was the message suited to the struggles you face? Praise God! But I fear for worse reasons for the comment. What if you liked the sermon because I blasted those other sinners and made you feel self-righteous? Not good. And, what does it mean if you don’t comment next week? Does it mean anything at all?

Today I want you to think about what makes a sermon good, bad, better or worse. We celebrate the Festival of Pentecost, the Coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter stood up and preached a stunning sermon. Do you remember what he said? For that matter, have any sermons ever stuck in your head? So, does your short memory make every sermon worthless? I suggest to you that two things make a sermon good: When the Holy Spirit uses it to cut to your heart and to move your faith that was a good sermon.

Peter’s sermon on Pentecost is recorded in Scripture for us as a good example of preaching that cuts to the heart. The Holy Spirit is the one who is active through the words to hit home in us. For the Spirit to do that, you have to be listening. On Pentecost, plenty of people were listening. The disciples were all gathered together in a room. The miraculous sound of a rushing wind and the tongues of fire made people come running from all over. A large crowd gathered for a good sermon.

A sermon is not better if more people listen to it. Yet the best sermon does one no good if he doesn’t hear it. Preaching is usually done to a group of people. It is also spoken to be understood. The disciples were moved by the Spirit to speak in many languages on Pentecost. The crowd commented that they heard the message spoken fluently in their native language. If I spoke in Chinese or German or Spanish, it would do most of you no good (especially since I would be a bad speaker of those languages!). A good sermon has people listening, paying attention, and understanding the message.

A good sermon also evokes a reaction. That crowd on Pentecost had a number of reactions. Do you remember the words Luke recorded?

They were confused, completely baffled, amazed, perplexed, even mocking. Sometimes preachers put on an act, crafting language and motions to move people. Speakers are encouraged when listeners react to what was said. Sometimes I see a nod of the head, or a knowing look in the eye. Other times all I see is a blank stare or drooping eyes. (Lutherans aren’t good at emotion!) A good sermon evokes a reaction from those who hear.

Yet, a good sermon does not depend on the preacher. Each pastor has a different style, but style doesn’t make a sermon good. All the disciples on Pentecost spoke movingly for people to hear. They each had different gifts and abilities. God used them all to preach. In fact, the crowd was amazed that such powerful preaching should come from the lips of these unlearned Galileans! No, a good sermon does not depend on the messenger, but on the message that is given.

The message, then, is the most important part of preaching. If we would continue reading Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, we would see the main points he made: “You killed the Savior God sent. God raised him and exalted him. He now rules in power. Listen! If things continue as they are, you are on the wrong side of God.” Luke says that the listeners were cut to the heart and asked, “Brothers, what should we do?”

When the Spirit cuts to our heart, we have heard a good sermon. The message ought not point to all those other people out there and the condemnation they deserve. [A Pharisee reacts, “Good thing I am not like them!”] A good sermon does not merely tell us information in the Bible. A good sermon cuts to our heart with a message of sin. Our sin. The Holy Spirit moves us to realize that our words and actions are corrupt and impure. The “blood and fire and a rising cloud of smoke” at “the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord” alarms us! Guilt brings God’s curse. A good sermon condemns us or it is not doing its job.

How can a preacher address all the sins of all his people from the pulpit? There are grandparents and children and single people and lifelong Christians and new converts here – all with different interests. How can any sermon be good if it has to hit the heart of every person listening to it?

Remember the occasion today. The Holy Spirit made Peter’s preaching good. He is working today. The Spirit meets you where you are with a Law message. He knows your weakness, your pride, your straying from the Shepherd’s fold. Return to the Lord! The words you hear are the Spirit’s power to cut to your heart and expose your sin. You killed God’s Son by your lawlessness! The Spirit uses those Law words to turn you around. Listen, react, repent and believe what the Lord says about your sin. When the Spirit cuts to your heart, you have heard a good sermon.

On Pentecost several people in the crowd reacted unfavorably to the message. Some mocked the disciples as being drunk. It seems no one really knew what was going on at first. I fear that is the reaction to some of my sermons, too: "What is he trying to say?" I suppose every sermon could be better. But a sermon is more than just a speech, a presentation, or a display of speaking skills. It is God's Word given to move your faith in Jesus. When the Spirit moves your faith, you have heard a good sermon.

The world has no lack of motivating speakers. Successful people in business, marketing, manufacturing, and in the military know how to get people to move when they talk. A sermon intends to move people, but not by secular methods or emotional tricks. Sermons must remain faithful to the Word of God. On the first Pentecost, Peter spoke of Jesus, a man accredited by God through his signs and miracles. The leaders and the people crucified him, but God raised him to life. This miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit was proof that Jesus is the Savior of all. His words are the power of God for salvation. A good sermon today must be faithful to Scripture. False teaching ruins a sermon. Instead of moving faith, false teaching harms faith, even destroys faith. The Spirit does not use error, but God's true Word to strengthen and lead us in faith.

A good sermon does more than just inform about the Bible. It points to the promises of God. Peter quoted the prophet Joel, who spoke of the Spirit being poured out on God's people in the last days. God's judgment is coming on all who remain in their sin! Jesus is the only rescue from the coming terrors. He alone forgives sin and gives eternal life. Those who listened to the words of the apostles would be rescued, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

A sermon must focus on Christ Jesus the only Savior. He has perfectly obeyed the law for you. He removed God's curse from you. He did it all by his death and resurrection. If a sermon does not focus on what Jesus has done, it only drags you through the drudgery of what you must do. If it centers on weak, human achievements, it fails to be a good sermon. If we stop seeing Jesus, we lose out and are lost forever. A good sermon, then, points to God's promises, and centers on Jesus' forgiveness.

One of the harshest criticisms I have heard about a sermon came from one of my Seminary professors. A classmate had preached on an Old Testament lesson in class. Everyone had opportunity to comment and learn from the experience. He had talked about God's love and faithfulness, his promises. We thought it was good. But the professor said, "Was there anything in that sermon that could not have been said in a Jewish synagogue? Where was Jesus?" The sermon did not bring Jesus and his

forgiveness to the forefront. It was a bad sermon, hopeless and powerless. A good sermon that moves faith must center on Jesus.

A sermon that points to Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit's power, and it will bring urgency to living. Peter's sermon moved thousands to ask what they should do. They repented of their sin and unbelief, and they were baptized. God gave them faith! The congregation in Jerusalem grew and joyously lived in faith. Believers shared their possessions, took care of the needy, reached out to others, and worshiped regularly. No one could live in their former way of life, for Jesus changed everything.

The Holy Spirit moves our faith closer to Jesus through the words we hear. The urgencies in our Christian living may vary, but we cannot live like the world! Does our stewardship need reconsidering? Do we keep the abundance of God's grace in storehouses for ourselves, or do we generously give thanks? Does our compassion need building up? We want to help those in need around us! Who have you told about Jesus lately? Perhaps the Spirit needs to bring his urgency as we arrange our schedules. What good is it if we make it to soccer, to baseball, to cards and camping, if we miss worship, Bible Class, devotions, and personal prayer? We can gain the whole world, yet forfeit our soul! A good sermon brings urgency. Jesus, who sent the Spirit in power on Pentecost, will return in glory. Will he find us ready?

You might think that a good sermon is hard to find. So many things can get in the way of a good sermon: tired eyes, the distractions around us, unclear speech, a lack of focus. Yet, a good sermon may be quite common. The power and working comes through the Holy Spirit. When the Word of the Father is proclaimed faithfully, and when Jesus is the center of our worship, the Holy Spirit is active. He cuts to our hearts and he moves our faith. He makes even the ramblings of a harried pastor into a good sermon.

Admittedly, some pastors preach better than others. They are interesting, personal, and timely. I can assure you of this: a pastor puts a good amount of work into his sermon. He crafts it and tests it and prays over it. Be a good listener. Work at it yourself, preparing by getting plenty of sleep. Read the lesson ahead of time. Keep an eye out for where the law cuts to your heart and leads to repentance. Find comfort as you are focused on Jesus and trust his promises more. Look past the preacher to the message. The Spirit will move your faith with God's gospel power.

Some say that a good sermon only begins when the pastor says "Amen," for we take the word home and live it. Graduates, I pray that you live your faith in the next stages of your life. All of you have received the Holy Spirit this Pentecost Day, through the Gospel you have heard. I pray that God make you into a good sermon. SDG Amen.